



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

First Minister

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the Assembly that I have received a letter from the First Minister, dated 3 February 2010, revoking with effect from that date his earlier letter, in which he had designated the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to exercise the functions of the office of First Minister.

Suspension of Standing Orders

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1)(a) be suspended for 8 February 2010.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer you to the first item of business that you dealt with, namely the letter from the First Minister in which he revoked his decision to step down as First Minister. Given that his decisions to step down and to step back into the office of First Minister were important political developments and matters of high public interest and that those decisions affected the authority and standing of both the Executive and the Assembly — Mr Robinson is not just First Minister but a Member of the Assembly — is it not in order that the terms of the opinion given to the First Minister by Mr Paul Maguire QC should be lodged in the Assembly Library? Is it not in order that the terms of reference given to Mr Maguire when forming his opinion should be lodged in the Assembly Library? Is it not —

Mr Speaker: Order. Those are matters for the First Minister to deal with. It is not for the House to judge what the First Minister might do now or in the future. What I have said this morning clarifies the situation as far as I am concerned. Thereafter, those are decisions for the First Minister.

Mr Attwood: I understand why you have said that, Mr Speaker. However, the First Minister is a Member of this House, serves at its discretion and was nominated to his position by it. Therefore, matters in respect of stepping down from and back into that office, on which I make no particular value judgement —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should take his place. There are avenues open to the Member, and, if he wishes to pursue the matter, he can do so through questions to the First Minister or through a motion in the House. Raising the matter through a point of order will not be effective. I remind the House that there are procedures: Members can speak to the Clerks about the procedures and conventions through which they can raise issues properly in the House. It should certainly not be done through points of order.

We shall return to the business. Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1)(a) be suspended for 8 February 2010.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Ministerial Statement

SparkleBox Teacher Resource Website

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá brón orm go raibh an ráiteas deireannach. I apologise to the House for being late in getting the statement to it. I finalised it on Friday night, and my officials made final amendments this morning. This is an important issue, and I wanted to ensure that we got the statement right.

Ba mhian liom ráiteas a thabhairt faoin láithreán gréasáin acmhainní múinteora SparkleBox. SparkleBox is a website that contains resources for primary-school teachers that can be downloaded for classroom use with pupils. The site was owned and operated by Samuel Kinge, a teacher who had been jailed in Warwick in January 2005 for possession of child pornography.

Kinge started SparkleBox in February 2006, having changed his name to Daniel Kinge. In September 2009, he was arrested again for making and possessing indecent images of children. On 8 January 2010, Worcester Crown Court sentenced him to 12 months in prison and served him with a 15-year sexual offences prevention order, which bans him from using a computer unless it has a police detection programme installed. The site was used by teachers in Ireland, North and South, and England, Wales and Scotland.

Bhí scoileanna anseo ábalta teacht ar SparkleBox tríd an líonra C2k, a sholáthraíonn seirbhís bainistithe TFC do gach scoil dheontaschúnta. Bainistítear soláthar na seirbhísí thar ceann gach bord oideachais agus leabharlainne ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair.

SparkleBox was available to schools here through the Classroom 2000 (C2k) network, which provides an ICT-managed service to all grant-aided schools. The provision of the service is managed on behalf of all the education and library boards by the Western Education and Library Board.

I am advised that C2k became aware of the issues surrounding SparkleBox in December

2009. I understand that C2k liaised with the regional broadband consortia in England, a number of which had blocked access to SparkleBox until they were satisfied that suitable safeguarding arrangements were in place. It appears that C2k took the view that sufficient arrangements were in place to ensure the safety of users; so, initially, it did not remove access to the site. It is C2k's position that its system has automatic filters in place to block any possible interactive component in the site, such as blogs and toolbars.

On 28 January 2010, a parent from a Belfast primary school who had heard of Kinge's conviction informed the school, which instructed its teachers not to use SparkleBox and reported its position to C2k.

Ar 28 Eanáir 2010 chuala tuismitheoir a raibh páiste acu i mbunscoil faoi chiontú Kinge agus threoraigh bunscoil Bhéal Feirste múinteoirí gan úsáid a bhaint as Sparklebox, agus a chuir a seasamh in iúl do C2k.

On Monday 1 February, C2k changed its decision from not blocking the site to blocking it, and I am advised that it informed schools of that decision and that the site remains blocked.

Fuair mé fios ar an tsaincheist seo ar 29 Eanáir. D'eisigh mo Roinn preasráiteas le dearbhú go bhfuil scagairí i bhfeidhm ag an chóras C2k le bac a chur le hinneachar dochrach gréasáin, agus tá an Roinn ag comhoibriú le C2k ar an tsaincheist seo.

I became aware of the issue on 29 January. My Department issued a press statement to confirm that the C2k system has filters in place to block potentially harmful web content and that the Department was liaising with C2k on the matter.

Mar is eol daoibh, glacaim an-dáiríre dualgas mo Roinne le cinntiú go gcosnaítear sábháilteacht páistí i ngach gné dá n-oideachas. Is fíor-thábhachtach dom a sábháilteacht, agus féachaim le mé féin a chinntiú ar bhonn leanúnach go bhfuil na polasaithe agus nósanna imeachta atá i bhfeidhm iomchuí agus éifeachtach.

As Members will appreciate, I take very seriously my duty and that of my Department to ensure that the safety of pupils is safeguarded in all aspects of their education. I regard their safety as of paramount importance, and I seek to ensure, on an ongoing basis, that the

policies and procedures in place are appropriate and effective. On a without-prejudice basis, I remain to be convinced that responses to that particular situation were proportionate and timely.

Dá bhrí sin, scríobh mo Roinn chuig príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair lena iarraidh air iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar an dóigh ar bainistíodh an tsaincheist seo agus moltaí a dhéanamh ar cad iad na ceachtanna is féidir a fhoghlaim ón cheist maidir le polasaithe agus nósanna imeachta a fheabhsú chun sábháilteacht páistí a chosaint.

Accordingly, my Department has written to the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board to instruct him to investigate the manner in which the situation was handled and to make recommendations on what lessons can be learned from that to enhance further the policies and procedures for protecting the safety of children. I expect a full report on or before 24 March 2010.

Maidir leis an ráiteas seo, beidh mé ag scríobh chuig Batt O’Keeffe TD, an tAire Oideachais agus Eolaíochta sa Deisceart, agus chuig mo chomhghleacaithe aireachta i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag le mo chur chuige ar an tsaincheist seo a chur in iúl dóibh.

On the basis of this statement, I am writing to Batt O’Keeffe TD, Minister of Education and Science in the South, and to my ministerial counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales to inform them of my approach to the matter.

Cuirfear cóip den ráiteas seo chuig gach scoil agus eagraíocht eile atá faoi chothabháil ag mo Roinn.

A copy of this statement will issue today to all schools and other bodies that are grant-aided by my Department. My Department will issue follow-up guidance to the circular on Internet safety that was issued in June 2007. That new guidance will specifically refer to safeguarding arrangements in light of the SparkleBox experience.

Ina theannta sin, fanaim mo chuid feidhmeannach go hiomlán i ngleic le hidirghúpa aireachta na Roinne Sláinte um chosaint páistí. Tá an grúpa seo ag obair ar phlean gníomhaíochta a chuirfidh bearta i bhfeidhm le ríomh-shábháilteacht a fheabhsú do dhaoine óga.

Furthermore, my officials remain fully engaged with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) interdepartmental group on safeguarding children. That group is progressing work on an action plan that will set in place measures to enhance even further e-safety for our children and young people.

Mar fhocal scoir, fanann an suíomh Sparklebox bactha ag C2k, iniúchfar go hiomlán bainistíocht an teagmhais seo, agus tiocfaidh mé ar ais don Tionól ar an tsaincheist seo chomh luath agus is féidir.

The SparkleBox site remains blocked by C2k. The handling of the incident will be fully investigated, and I will come back to the Assembly on the matter at the earliest opportunity. I am also writing to all the website providers to alert them to my concerns.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): Obviously, this issue is of grave concern to the House, and we welcome the fact that the Minister has come here to make her statement. I inform the House that the Committee for Education requested and received a briefing from Department of Education (DE) officials in November 2009 on the measures that the Department had taken to provide protection for children at school.

12.15 pm

The Committee was informed of new inter-agency structures, including, this year, the establishment of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland and the current risk assessment arrangements for the supervision of convicted sex offenders as provided by the Northern Ireland Sex Offender Strategic Management Committee.

The SparkleBox case appears to expose a potential loophole that allowed a convicted sex offender to run a website that was aimed at schools and schoolchildren. Will the Minister assure the House that all convicted, registered child sex offenders are banned from having direct contact with children? Will she also explain what measures have been put in place in Northern Ireland to detect sex offenders who are seeking to set up websites that are aimed at schools and schoolchildren or seeking to work in such a business?

Speaking as a Member, I ask the Minister why it took a parent to notify the school of the

situation, despite the information having been available since December 2009. Perhaps the Minister was being more than generous when she said:

"I remain to be convinced that responses to that particular situation were proportionate and timely."

The response was highly inappropriate, as it was left to a parent. We must learn the lessons from that case.

Will the Minister explain what measures will be put in place immediately — as opposed to a review that will last for weeks — to protect children?

The Minister of Education: I pay tribute to the parent and the schools involved. It is important that, as parents, we are vigilant around Internet usage and safeguarding children. As Members know, the issues are complex, and there have been many similar Internet cases. Therefore, it is essential that police services across Ireland and between Britain and Ireland liaise closely. That is why, at some of the first meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, child protection was at the top of the agenda, where all parties wanted it to be.

I share the Member's concerns that all children in Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales need to be protected. I pledge to do everything that I can to ensure that that happens at all levels. It is a cross-cutting matter, across all Departments, and one which involves education, health and police services.

I asked to make a statement because I do not believe that any aspect of any issue that relates to safeguarding children should be hidden.

I have come here openly to give a detailed statement. I have asked for the situation to be investigated — it is an investigation and not a review — because it is an issue that I take very seriously. I am not going to pre-empt the outcome of that. However, I have questions, which the investigation will look at, and I expect very clear answers.

One reason for the investigation is so that we can constantly learn and update our information. As I said, guidelines were brought forward in 2007. However, those guidelines need to be constantly updated. I, along with my Department, am contacting service providers in the North, in England, Scotland and Wales, and throughout the island of Ireland. We must block

off all loopholes. I hope that that answers the Member's question.

I want to talk briefly about child protection in schools. Through the curriculum, pupils are encouraged to develop strategies to keep safe. The personal development strand of the revised curriculum provides a vehicle for conveying messages about normal and acceptable behaviour, problem solving and sources of help and advice. Also, all staff, paid and unpaid, who are working in schools must be vetted to ensure that only suitable people work with pupils. In due course, they will be required to join the new vetting and barring scheme. Also, the arrangements set out in this paper for ensuring the appropriate response when concerns are raised about an individual pupil will aid child protection.

As the Member knows, all schools have a named designated teacher for child protection and a named deputy designated teacher. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. What guidance or measures on Internet usage does the Department have in place to assist schools?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Since April 2003, all grant-aided schools have been required to implement a child protection policy. When preparing its policy, a school must take into account the most recent advice from the Department of Education, the relevant education and library board and, in the case of Catholic maintained schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Advice to schools on child protection matters is issued by means of a departmental education circular. All advice issued by the Department is consistent with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's document 'Co-operating to Safeguard Children' and the policies and procedures of the regional area child protection committee.

Schools are supported in their work to safeguard children by the Child Protection Support Service for Schools (CPSSS), which is based in each education and library board. The CPSSS operates a helpline for school staff on child protection issues and is accessible every day during term time. The CPSSS provides an extensive range of training and capacity building to designated

teachers, principals, members of boards of governors and other staff who work with pupils and support schools with individual cases.

Every school inspection includes an examination of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), and there is an agreed procedure in cases where a school's arrangements are rated as unsatisfactory. In such cases, the ETI will reassess the position after six weeks, and, if the necessary improvements have not been made, the Department will intervene.

The advice and guidance given to schools are kept under continuous review. Within DE, the safeguarding advisory group comprises all key policy areas with responsibilities that contribute to child protection. It meets quarterly to review developments and exchange information. A standing group, the designated officers for child protection in education group (DOCPEG), has representatives from each of the education and library boards and is chaired by the Department. It meets monthly to consider emerging issues, such as the one that we are discussing, that arrive from casework in schools and developments in policy and best practice on safeguarding children in Ireland and elsewhere.

Representation of the schools sector's interests at an operational level — on health and social services boards — is undertaken by members of DOCPEG.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister has outlined her concern on this issue. Is it possible to find out who has visited the website and discover whether any harmful material was downloaded?

The Minister of Education: As I said, I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the investigation. I will bring the Member's question to the Western Education and Library Board. I was advised that there was no harmful content on the website, but I await the outcome of the investigation.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This issue is of great concern to all Members. It is important that we reassure teachers and parents today that the system fully protects children in our schools and at home.

Instead of waiting for the outcome of any inquiry, will the Minister issue guidance today to C2k and the Western Education and Library Board

informing them that immediate action will be taken and that schools will be informed directly if any similar situation occurs?

The Minister of Education: My officials have been in touch with C2k. I will send a copy of the statement to schools, but I have informed the House first because it is appropriate to do so. There should be no hiding place for people who download pornography or have been convicted of offences that relate to pornography. The key issue is to protect our children and young people, and I will take every possible measure to ensure that our children are protected. I will take the Member's comments on board. C2k and the Western Education and Library Board understand exactly the importance that I place on this issue, and they understand that harmful material needs to be blocked immediately.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the fact that the site has been blocked and that a full investigation will take place. Does the Minister have any information about the extent to which the site was used? The site provides resources for teachers. Has it been regarded as useful? I had never heard of it until recently. As Basil McCrea said, has any suspect material been found on the site? Lastly — if I am allowed to ask another question — it seems incredible that, given that the surname of the person in question has such an unusual spelling, he avoided the law at the outset of the episode by merely changing his Christian name. What checks are in place to prevent that happening in the first place?

The Minister of Education: I share the Member's concern about people being able to change their name. The latest conviction was his second. The best check is for organisations in the health sector, the education sector and police services across Ireland and Britain to work together. We need to learn from this episode, and that is one reason why I will write to my counterparts in the South of Ireland and in England, Scotland and Wales. The best way to deal with the situation is to make information public so that the occurrence of a similar incident becomes much less likely. I have been informed that there was no suspect material on the site. However, I will await the outcome of the investigation.

Miss McIlveen: I welcome the Minister's statement. Is the Minister here today voluntarily, or was she advised by others to update the Assembly? Given that it is Internet safety week,

it is timely to seek assurance that Internet safety is a key priority of the Department of Education. Will the Minister outline the input that her Department has given to the ministerial subgroup on safeguarding Internet safety? Moreover, will she provide an update on her Department's interface with the work of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety?

The Minister of Education: I asked to make a statement in the House, because I understand the importance of the issues and I want to take appropriate action. As I said, child safety is paramount.

My Department actively works with the health sector and other organisations on Internet safety. I discussed suicide prevention and Internet use with my colleague Michael McGimpsey and the various working groups. That is a key issue, as is child pornography. I sit on the working group that deals with violence against women and children, and I take that issue very seriously. Indeed, my Department is working on a programme to consider the whole issue of sexual and domestic violence against women and children. This incident is part and parcel of that.

It is timely that this is Internet safety week. We need to learn from good practice not only on these islands but across Europe and across the world. The more we share good practice, the more chance we have of ensuring that individuals such as the person involved in this case cannot continue to operate as they have in the past.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and the importance that she has attached and attention that she has given to the issue.

It is important not to scaremonger, but parents have genuine concerns. Although the site is now blocked, what assurances can the Minister give to parents that previous use of the site has not allowed children to access questionable material?

12.30 pm

The Minister of Education: As I said, my information to date is that there is no harmful material on that website. Nevertheless, the investigation is continuing, and I will report back fully to the House on that. I want to reassure parents as best I can. I am a parent, and I understand the difficulties that surround Internet access. The Internet can be a very positive tool, but, equally, if it is not monitored

and safeguarded correctly, it can be a very dangerous tool. As parents, we have huge responsibilities. Parents can be reassured that C2k has blocked the website even though no harmful material was found on it. It is right and proper that that website should be blocked.

Mr Ross: The Minister said that C2k became aware of this issue in December 2009, but that she had not been made aware of it until 29 January 2010. Will she tell the House why that was the case, and why she was not informed immediately about something of such magnitude? Will she tell the House what protocols exist to inform her immediately when something as serious as this occurs? When C2k took its initial decision, in the belief that adequate safeguards were in place, who did it consult to come to that determination?

The Minister of Education: I should have been informed as soon as C2k was aware of the situation. Indeed, I should have been informed in September 2009, when the individual was charged. The investigation needs to look at that. We must learn from that; procedures must be put in place across Ireland and Britain to ensure that action is taken to inform the relevant authorities as soon as someone is charged with such offences. The investigation will examine all my Department's procedures and protocols as well as those of other bodies. This situation has an effect not just on education but on wider society, and it is an issue for police services across these islands.

Mr McCallister: The Minister said that her officials are engaged in the investigation process. What has her personal involvement been in overseeing C2k's protection policies?

The Minister of Education: I work very closely with all my officials on safeguarding and child protection. As soon as I heard about the matter in question, I called a meeting of senior officials. Safeguarding was one of the key areas of discussion. I told the meeting that I wanted to explain the situation to the Assembly immediately, and work began immediately to draw up my statement.

I am personally involved daily in child protection. I have worked with my officials to institute a new programme for safeguarding children in schools, and I will provide the House with details of that programme in the near future. It is starting in primary schools so that we can train teachers to look at the issues of domestic and sexual

violence in an age-appropriate way and ensure that we deal with some of those issues at the earliest possible stage.

I have always said that violence against women and children at all levels is one of the key challenges facing our society, and I take it very seriously. We are looking at those issues from the point of view of our special educational needs and inclusion strategy. That is very important, and I am glad that some good may come out of my making a statement today. The more that we speak about this issue, and the more that we work across Departments, North and South, east and west, the better chance that we have of dealing with people such as the person who was found guilty of downloading images.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the House will be concerned to hear that I believe there to be a factual inaccuracy in the Minister's statement. It was, in fact, on 28 December 2009 that a parent of a pupil at Stranmillis Primary School in south Belfast approached me in my capacity as a Member of the Assembly and made me aware of the situation. I, in turn, informed the school, and by way of a written question for two-day priority answer, I informed the Department of Education of the situation.

Why has my question for written answer, which was tabled on 28 January 2010 and was due for answer on 2 February 2010, not yet been answered? Furthermore, why was her Department asleep on its watch? What does that say about the record of the Assembly, the Executive and her party on child protection? It is simply not good enough. The answer to that question for written answer has not been received, and many parents will want proper answers as to why the Minister had to come to the House to make a statement for us to get the answers that we sought.

The Minister of Education: I have answered the Member's question, and I welcome the tone of the debate. Nobody should play politics with this important issue. These are complex matters, and Internet safety is complex. I pledge to do everything that I can to protect our children.

I came to the House to explain what we are doing and to make sure that there will be a thorough investigation into the matter. I have answered the Member's question, but before I could do so, I needed to investigate the matter fully and thoroughly. If there is an inaccuracy in

the statement, I will correct it. The key point, however, is that we should not be playing politics. This is an issue that all of us must deal with together. Joint all-party working groups are dealing with issues such as violence against women and children. They are also dealing with suicide prevention, and the role of the Internet in that matter concerns us, too. Michael McGimpsey did very good work on that issue, and I was a member of the working group that dealt with it. Therefore, if there is an inaccuracy in the statement, I will correct it, but, please, do not play politics with child protection.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that I am new to the House, and I may be forgiven for misreading Standing Orders, but I understand that the process for dealing with a two-day priority question for written answer is just that — a two-day process. That method was used on this occasion to expedite the information and to bring it into the public domain. I have still not received an answer to my question for written answer.

Mr Speaker: I certainly hear what the Member said. I have made it clear in the House and elsewhere on many occasions that I expect Members to get very prompt answers to priority questions for written answer that are asked of any Department. I have raised the matter in the past with the Executive, and I will do so in the future.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raised with you previously the difficulty of receiving ministerial statements just as Members are about to speak on the matter in question. This is a serious issue; it is not an attempt to have a go at the Minister, because she apologised. I understand that, and that is fair enough. However, we need to find a way to get statements to Members in time for them to make proper responses. I need your help in that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I hear the Member's point of order. I have continually urged Ministers that they should, as far as possible, make statements available much earlier. However, the Minister apologised to the House, and she gave a frank reason as to why the statement was late.

Executive Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Moved. — [The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been selected, there is no opportunity to discuss the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

McElhill/McGovern Tragedy in Omagh

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.

Jim Wells, Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, was to move the motion. Unfortunately, Jim has been taken ill, and our thoughts are with him. Michelle O'Neill, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, has kindly stepped into the breach.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

(Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also extend my best wishes to Jim, and I hope that he makes a speedy recovery.

The events of 13 November 2007 were appalling. Seven people, five of whom were children, died in a house fire in the Lammy area of Omagh. The magnitude of that outrage, which was one of the most horrific cases ever seen, warrants a public inquiry.

However, the Committee thought long and hard before agreeing to table the motion. Members did not want an inquiry to rake up the tragedy of the events in Omagh or to cause more pain to the families and individuals involved. The Committee wants to take into account the feelings of the bereaved McElhill and McGovern families, who have suffered over the past two years. Those two families are not the only ones who suffered, as the tragic event had a considerable impact on the local community. That is why individual members of the Committee were tasked with discussing the possibility of a public inquiry either with communities in the Omagh area or with their local party representatives.

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

The motion calls for a time-bound inquiry into the multi-agency aspects of the tragedy, and it does not aim to rake up the events. From consulting individual members of the families involved, we understand that, in those limited circumstances, they would cautiously welcome

an inquiry. A number of reviews have taken place since the Omagh tragedy, including the coroner's report and the wide-ranging Toner report. It covered the health, social services and education aspects of the event, and it was welcomed at the time. The Committee heard from the Western Trust that the Toner report's recommendations have been extremely useful. The recommendations were accepted fully and have helped to shape and improve children's services across the North.

The Committee is aware that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has asked Henry Toner QC to revisit the Western Trust to find out whether and how his recommendations have been implemented. The Committee welcomes the Minister's actions, but is still concerned that new information has come to light as a result of the coroner's report. That information reminds us that numerous agencies, not only the Western Health and Social Care Trust, were involved in the awful tragedy.

The police, the Probation Board and the Prison Service also had roles to play. After the events, each of those organisations held an internal review in addition to a multi-agency case review. The Committee has seen and considered the multi-agency case review, which was highly specific. It focused on the inter-agency handling of Arthur McElhill as a registered sex offender from his time in prison until his death in November 2007. The Committee's view is that the public inquiry should consider the roles of all those organisations and, specifically, how they interacted.

The Western Trust has been open and public about its role in the events. That is to be commended, as it helped to raise public confidence that the trust is not trying to hide anything. When the Committee spoke with the trust recently, members were impressed by how seriously it took the Toner report's recommendations on child protection. We also became aware of the impact that the tragedy has had on staff in the Western Trust and the amount of stress and strain under which they have been placed. Social services staff were particularly devastated by the tragedy.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, I acknowledge that people working in child protection have a difficult job. It is an incredibly complicated and stressful job, yet, every day, in a quiet and private manner, social services staff

in the Western Trust work to protect and to look after children. I hope that I have been clear that the Committee is not interested in social-worker bashing. We recognise that they do a difficult job, often in trying and heart-rending circumstances, with little public acknowledgement but a high degree of professionalism.

However, the other organisations involved, such as the PSNI and the Probation Board, lie outside the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Those agencies are not devolved and remain under the remit of the Secretary of State. Therefore, the motion calls on the Minister to seek the consent of the Secretary of State to the multi-agency inquiry. The Committee wants a public examination of how those agencies worked together, communicated, relayed information and acted on their joint concerns.

An inquiry should take account of that and, indeed, of the information that emerged from the recent coroner's report. It should not focus solely on the Western Trust. The inquiry should be time-bound because we do not want an expensive inquiry that runs for months or even years. The Committee does not want any wallowing in the horrible details of the case, but it wants to ensure that such a terrible situation can never be allowed to arise again.

12.45 pm

The Committee will soon focus some of its attention on the policy area of child protection. At the end of February, we will begin a detailed and focused consideration of the main issues and factors in relation to safeguarding children and how to improve multi-agency working. We have arranged to take evidence from a range of bodies, including the PSNI, children's charities and health and social care trusts. We will use that opportunity to explore the issues concerning multi-agency working in an attempt to improve the situation. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and congratulate the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for bringing the debate to the House. The tragic events of Tuesday 13 November 2007, when a fire killed seven people — two adults and five children — were traumatic for everyone concerned: the McGovern family, the McElhill family, the local community

of Lammy in Omagh, the emergency services, social workers, the wider Omagh community and local elected representatives.

In coming to my decision to call for a public inquiry, I read the Toner report, the Watkins report and the inquest reports. I also had a number of meetings with various agencies and the two families concerned. Before Christmas, I met the personnel responsible for public protection arrangements, including the PSNI. Broadly speaking, their view was that the Watkins report covered all their responsibilities and that the new public protection arrangements had corrected any shortcomings that may have existed in the old multi-agency sex offender risk assessment and management (MASRAM) arrangements. The people responsible for the public protection arrangements did not see any great value in a public inquiry.

Before and after Christmas, I had meetings and conducted telephone conversations with the McGovern and McElhill families. The McGovern family and, indeed, the McElhill family were hugely concerned about the re-emergence of public focus on the case. However, the McGovern family felt that they would go along with a public inquiry if it could save any other person or family.

The McElhill family were hugely affected by the tragedy and felt that they, as an extended family, were being blamed for what happened; they were traumatised. Both families had a huge number of questions that they wanted to be answered. The McElhill family were not particularly convinced that a public inquiry would help; they were neither for nor against the idea. However, although the family was afraid of the public focus that may be placed on it, its members still had many questions that they wanted to be answered.

I met senior representatives from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who felt that the 63 recommendations of the Toner report had met all the demands. On the same day, I met Paul Goggins from the NIO. He referred to the Watkins and Toner reports and said that although he was not minded to hold a public inquiry, he was minded to try to find a mechanism that would provide answers to the families' questions.

I was also in touch with the Policing Board, and I am glad to say that it has made moves for social workers to work in co-operation

with the PSNI. I meet the Lammy community representative regularly, and I am mindful that a spokesperson for the social workers' trade union has called for a public inquiry.

Having read the Toner report, the Watkins report and the findings of the inquest, and having held all the meetings to which I have referred, I conclude that there was a lack of cohesion among the agencies. That can, and has, led to warning signals not being noted. Such warning signals can prevent tragedies from occurring. Therefore, I support the motion and call for a public inquiry.

As we strive to secure the Secretary of State's agreement for a public inquiry, we must be mindful of the acute sensitivities of everyone involved, particularly those of the families and the local community in Lammy, Omagh. An example of that is the burnt-out remains of the McElhill home. However, communication is under way between the Housing Executive and the McElhill family to have that issue resolved. The community is well aware of that.

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

Mr Doherty: I thank the Western Education and Library Board's critical incident response team, which supported the local community throughout the trauma, and I thank the emergency services.

Mr McCallister: Like others, I wish the Chairperson of the Committee a speedy recovery.

The tragedy that occurred in Omagh in November 2007 was a truly awful event for the families of those involved, the wider community, the town and the district. An entire family perished in the fire. It was a human tragedy, and it brings very sobering thoughts to us all. The whole House offers its sympathy to the families and the community on the memory of that awful event.

It is clear that there were failings in the system with respect to the McElhill case. In at least 10 points in the Toner report, the panel found instances when what should have been done was not done. Toner concluded that although none of the agencies involved had any indication that such tragic events were about to happen, those agencies identified processes that could have been better carried out. The files of previous relevant cases should have been sought by those involved in the McElhill

case at particular points, but they were not. Information that should have been passed from one agency to another was not passed on. A risk-management discussion should have taken place, but it did not. The Toner panel identified those failings and drew them to public attention. They are now in the public domain, together with the panel's recommendations, and that is important. Failings have been identified, together with recommendations on how to ensure that they do not recur. We can all read those recommendations, and Members, particularly members of the Health Committee, can check the progress made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in implementing them.

The Toner inquiry was independent, thorough and covered all the relevant agencies. The report makes recommendations that involve the Police Service, and the panel included a senior police officer. Recently, the Minister asked Mr Toner to return to the Western Trust to ensure that those recommendations are being implemented. The Committee will want to make similar checks.

Let me reiterate: mistakes were made, they have been identified and steps have been taken to ensure that they are not repeated. The people involved have been informed of what they did wrong in this case. No useful purpose would be served by asking those people the same questions that Mr Toner asked them, simply so that they may be held up to blame. I do not wish to see the community in Omagh or the bereaved families put through another inquiry unless there is sound reason for it. There might be reason for it if a case can be made that Toner was not independent, was not sufficiently wide-ranging, or did not cover all the issues. I remain to be convinced that that case has been made.

As the motion implies, the Secretary of State is responsible for initiating an inquiry. The Health Committee should, perhaps, ask for his opinion and seek to persuade him that an inquiry is necessary.

The Toner inquiry was independent and thorough. It also identified all the salient information about the case, so would a repeat of that process be a good use of time? I aired my concerns about holding a public inquiry when the matter was discussed by the Health Committee. Mr Doherty talked about the effect that such an inquiry could have on the families and the community,

although I accept that he thought that a public inquiry was necessary. However, after hearing evidence from the communities and Ulster Unionist Party representatives in that area, I am certainly not convinced that a public inquiry would be welcomed by everyone.

When people talk about public inquiries —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr McCallister: I have huge concerns about how a time-bound public inquiry would be held.

Mrs D Kelly: I associate myself with the Deputy Chairperson's condolences to the families and the wider community who were bereaved as a result of that dreadful tragedy.

The Committee thought very seriously about the wording of the motion because this is a very sensitive subject. The last thing that anyone wishes to do is to make life more distressful for anyone involved or to open wounds that people are trying to heal. The length of time between the tragedy and the process of the coroner's inquest has not allowed people an opportunity to grieve or to come to terms with their dreadful loss.

Mr McCallister made it clear that the Toner report and the Watkins report were very wide-ranging and that many lessons were learned. He asked whether there were any gaps, which is one of the areas that we need to look at. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee said that if additional information came about through the inquest, there might well be a gap that needs to be addressed. That needs to be given some consideration.

Some Members paid tribute to the many good staff who work in very difficult psychological and emotional cases in which the best and worst of human relationships are exposed. We are told that 54 of the Toner report's 55 recommendations in respect of trusts have been implemented. It would be helpful if the Minister could outline whether all those have been implemented fully and whether the lessons were learned across all the trusts in the North, because the lack of investment in social services goes much wider than the McElhill/McGovern issue.

I have been disappointed that the Health Committee has not concentrated on social services as much as it ought to. It has given a

lot of consideration to health matters, sometimes to the detriment of other areas of responsibility that the Committee has to scrutinise.

I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate. I noted that he said that an additional £20 million would be invested in social services up to the end of 2011. How much of that £20 million is new money and additional resource? Does it come from existing budgets? We all know how difficult it is to recruit social workers into childcare. Retaining them is even more difficult because of the emotional toll that it takes on their lives, never mind the work that it involves overall.

1.00 pm

There are lessons to be learned by the police, the Policing Board and other agencies. There is also a real responsibility on us, as a society, to protect our children. So-called nosy neighbours who peek out from behind curtains and comment on what they see have a place in society. However, they must do something about what they see and report wrongdoing. We are all challenged not to stand idly by, merely look on or turn away from goings-on in our own communities.

Our party will carefully consider the call for a public inquiry. I look forward to hearing from the Minister. The motion has been carefully worded. As Mr McCallister said, we should find out what the Criminal Justice Minister, Mr Paul Goggins, has to say, because some of the responsibility for an inquiry lies with him. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety may have had those conversations, and I hope that he will inform the House of their outcome.

Mr Neeson: My contribution to the debate will be brief. I join other Members in wishing the Chairman of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety well. I hope that he makes a speedy recovery.

Alliance Party Members support the motion tabled by the Committee. The tragedy was yet another major blow for Omagh. I went to Omagh the day after the bomb in 1998, and the community has again been badly affected by the incident at Lammy Crescent, which should never have happened. The warning signs were already there and should have been acted upon.

The Toner inquiry was extensive, and many of its recommendations have been implemented. It is

important to learn lessons from the tragedy. If the warning signs had been heeded, the event might not have happened. However, the final point that I want to make is that what happened was a tragedy and our condolences must go to the families concerned. If a public inquiry is held, I hope that it will not be lengthy or as expensive as so many of the public inquiries in Northern Ireland over the years.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. I grew up near, and have close associations with, Omagh. The town is dear to my heart. I have been privileged to serve on its council since 1993 and to represent the area in the Assembly since 2007.

We all know that Omagh has experienced more than its fair share of tragedy. It is famous all over the world for the worst terrorist atrocity of the Troubles. In August 1998, 29 persons and two unborn children were brutally murdered; something that tore the town apart. It took quite some time to rebuild community relations in Omagh to the level that had existed before the bombing.

Just nine years later, tragedy struck again when, on 13 November 2007, a fire broke out in Lammy Crescent, in which a whole family — mother, father and five young children aged from 10 months to 13 years — perished. Unsurprisingly, there was immediate shock and horror at such a dreadful event.

The whole country was stunned by what, at first, seemed to be a terrible but natural tragedy. However, news began to emerge that the fire was started deliberately by a father, who had, himself, died, and feelings of shock and horror turned to ones of disbelief and anguish. We were faced with a suicide and multiple murder; an absolute nightmare. Then, as evidence began to emerge about Arthur McElhill, disbelief turned to anger. Everywhere I went, people rightly asked how on earth the authorities could have failed to heed all the warning signs. That question was very difficult to answer.

It is more than two years since those appalling events, but the pain and agony of the two families whose loved ones died in the fire is still very real. In addition, at the end of last year, they had to endure the ordeal of an inquest. Our thoughts and prayers must continue to be with the McGovern and McElhill families. We must remember that their pain will go on; it will not be forgotten, so they must not be forgotten. However, in this debate, it would not be fair to

them to go into the events of November 2007 in any detail. Indeed, it is not necessary to do so.

To make sure that the Lammey Crescent tragedy never happens again, it is important that lessons are learned. In that case, the failures by the relevant agencies were among the worst to be found anywhere. They were basic, fundamental and, worst of all, totally inexcusable. Although failures were found in particular key agencies, there is also evidence of an amazing lack of co-ordination and communication between those agencies. Why, on the basis of clear and extensive evidence going back several years, was Arthur McElhill, a convicted sex offender, regarded by officials as only being a low risk to himself and others? Why was preventative action that might have spared his life and the lives of his innocent partner and children not taken? Arthur McElhill had been known to the criminal and care authorities since 1993, but he was able to slip through the net, with most dreadful consequences.

I welcome the 63 recommendations in the Toner report, which was published last July. I welcome the progress that has been made on implementing Henry Toner's recommendations, but, to ensure that they are fully and swiftly implemented, I urge the Health Minister to keep the pressure on the authorities. Nevertheless, in light of what emerged from the Toner report and the recent inquest, there would be merit in holding a public inquiry. I know that inquiries can be costly and, sometimes, their conclusions can be ambiguous; however, in this case, the issues are so serious that a time-bound investigation would be a worthwhile exercise. Indeed, I go further and say that an investigation is vital to ensure that lessons are learned and such tragedies do not happen again.

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

Mr Buchanan: We have no desire to go back over the events of the tragedy. Nothing that we do can undo what happened of that dreadful day in November 2007.

Mr Deputy Speaker has called on me to finish. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also send my best wishes to the Chairperson of the Health Committee.

As a member of the Health Committee and as an MLA for West Tyrone, the constituency in which the awful tragedy occurred, I support the motion. There has been a lot of pain associated with the case, to which the local MP, Pat Doherty, referred, and he has spoken to the families. Therefore, I do not want to say anything that might add to the pain of anyone who was engaged with or in any way involved in the tragedy.

The McElhill/McGovern case is complex and multifaceted, and the two reports that are in the public domain, the Toner report and the Watkins report, illustrate those different aspects. Clearly, each report has a different focus and emphasis.

I commend the Western Trust for implementing the Toner report's recommendations. It is obvious in that report that mistakes were made and that the system did not work for the family. However, I must say that my reading of the Watkins report gave me no sense that the same gaps, issues and difficulties existed. For that reason, I believe that the motion is appropriate in this case. I want to repeat that its aim is not to raise a sensitive issue again and to cause difficulty for anyone who was involved with that particular tragedy.

I shall quote from the Toner report to illustrate its points and to tie them in with the Health Committee's motion. The report states:

"there were misconceptions on the part of many involved from the police and Social Services as to the role of the other agency and what might reasonably be expected from that other agency."

It goes on to state:

"The Interagency/ multi-disciplinary working across the range of professionals and other agencies was weak, confirmed through the records examined, interviews conducted and comments received from the various agencies".

As I have said, it is commendable that the Western Trust has implemented a number of the Toner Report's recommendations.

I turn now to the Watkins report. Comments have been made about the NIO. It issued a press release after the publication of the report, stating:

"The report found that there were no material deficiencies in inter-agency co-operation in relation to the delivery of the MASRAM arrangements in the case of Arthur McElhill."

The Watkins report's introduction refers to the case, which, it states:

"did not appear to have any sexual dimension".

Point 7 of the report states:

"Our approach has been, as required by the terms of reference, to retain the focus on McElhill as a sex offender".

Point 11 states:

"McElhill was also required to be placed on the Sex Offender Register indefinitely".

Finally, the PSNI visited the family many times. The Watkins report commends it for doing so. It states:

"The PSNI then visited McElhill again (and finally, as it turned out) on 5 November, noting no cause for concern."

The entire McElhill family perished on 13 November 2007.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr B McCrea: The events that happened in Omagh were, undoubtedly, a tragedy. We were all shocked to hear initial reports and what subsequently came to light. It is perhaps worth saying that just because a tragedy happens does not necessarily mean that everyone is at fault.

As a member of the Policing Board, I chair its human rights and professional standards committee. I want to clarify for the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee that the PSNI is under the oversight of politicians who represent all parties. The committee has looked at the issue.

1.15 pm

It is perhaps worth adding that I have spoken to the senior police officers involved and to others, and they have said that the decision-making process would not have changed, based on the information that was put forward to them. There was an offence in 1993 and a further offence in 1998, and, in 2004, a review was undertaken and the priority for Mr McElhill was downgraded from category two to category one. On that basis, the responsibility moved to the PSNI, and the designated risk manager visited Mr McElhill regularly, in line with requirements under the MASRAM procedures. However, there is an issue about the message that we all send out to the general public. I think that we are in danger

of castigating members of staff in the social services, the PSNI and elsewhere, who work in really difficult situations.

The point that I put to the House is that if lessons have been learned and the appropriate working relationships are now improved, one would have to consider whether a public inquiry is the right way to go, because there is a danger that an excessive amount of money could be spent on learning lessons that have already been learned. Therefore, perhaps a report should come from the House.

Our party will abstain from voting on the motion. We are open to persuasion, but there is sometimes a danger of having to be seen to be doing something because there has been a tragedy, and the public demand that something ought to be done about it. If all the right things had been done, or are being done, we would be better placed to use resources to prevent tragedies from happening in the future, rather than reporting on past tragedies.

At a senior level, we have not stepped up to the mark in respect of a number of issues. When the coroner's report was published, the multi-agency response was abysmal. Nobody came forward to explain the situation, and none of the organisations said that they were going to step forward and explain it to people for fear of being castigated as the agency that was responsible.

The procedures must be tightened up. As things stand, Assistant Chief Constable Will Kerr chairs the committee, and I have told him that he has to decide which agency is responsible. Is the committee simply a get-together, or does it have some statutory responsibility? Are there other things that we need to do? The public confidence messages that we send out are important.

Having looked closely at the public protection units, the PSNI has brought in some excellent measures, and it carries out its work in very trying circumstances. Recommendation 54 of the Toner report states that the PSNI should consider the secondment of a social services staff member. However, the difficulty was that we could not get anybody to come and do that work because of recruitment issues. People are trying to work together on these trying, difficult areas, and they need support. I urge the House to send a clear message to the public that we are on top of the matter, we are working together on it, and we are going to make the

appropriate decisions to safeguard the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Gallagher: I, too, want to say at the outset that the families who have been caught up in the centre of this tragedy have suffered great hurt and pain. There is also sadness and sorrow in the wider Omagh community. The McElhill family home is in County Fermanagh, and some of the family still live there with their parents, while others live in Tyrone and elsewhere. The McGovern family home is across the border in County Cavan. For those families, pain is an everyday experience, and it is something that simply will not go away.

I have spoken to some of the family members, and they say that the wounds of the event can be reopened by an occurrence as simple as passing a shop, when they are out and about, and seeing newspapers or magazines that are reporting something to do with the tragedy. That is how they live.

I am not entirely convinced about the need for a public inquiry. We have to rely on the professionals and respect their advice on such sensitive issues as this. We also have to listen to the public. I am getting a strong message from the public, aside from the families who have been caught up in the tragedy. The public are asking why we would throw money on more inquiries. They are saying that there are serious problems in homes where children live and where they are at risk and that money should be spent in that area. We have to keep all those things in balance.

Reference has been made to the Toner report and to the other reports that look at the serious cases that are being covered by the PSNI and the Prison Service. We must ensure that every letter of every recommendation in those reports is implemented. Members will hear from the Minister shortly, but I believe that there is a case in favour of the Department appointing to the Western Trust an independent individual to ensure that every weakness that is highlighted is dealt with and that the same mistakes will not happen again.

In 2009, we had the death of a young baby girl in her home in Enniskillen. The report of the western area's childcare committee was published recently, and we have to be concerned about its conclusions. In the past year, the PSNI in Fermanagh forwarded 52 prosecution files to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). Those

files related to child abuse, which, as Members know, could be physical or sexual abuse. That pattern is replicated across the western area in the Omagh and Derry districts. In addition, the number of children on the child protection register has grown noticeably over the past three years. That confirms that something has to be done now to ensure the safety of young children, even in their own homes.

Setting up public inquiries merely because of startling headlines might be a distraction from a growing problem, and I have mentioned some of the facts around that. There are, therefore, increased demands for assistance from social services and family support services and for the services that they provide, which, at present, are badly under-resourced and undermanned. Those services in the west are under a lot of pressure; the figures speak for themselves. We cannot continue like that. The Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee said that there would be a Committee inquiry, and there is a possibility of a public inquiry.

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

Mr Gallagher: Those sorts of inquiries must not distract staff resources, which are already scarce, from a very serious problem. To do so would demoralise the staff in the area who are working valiantly and leave them fed up, alone and isolated.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The events of 13 November 2007 are forever etched in our memories. Even now, more than two years later, it is difficult to comprehend how such a terrible tragedy could occur. The tragic events have had a tremendous impact on the community in Omagh and, in particular, on the families and friends of the victims, who will have to live with the grief for the rest of their lives. I am sure that I speak for all Members when I say that they are in our thoughts and prayers.

As Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I have a shared responsibility for the issue with other Ministers, given that the Western Trust was one of a number of key agencies involved with the McElhill/McGovern family. Early on, I recognised the need for an inquiry, which is why, in January 2008, I appointed Henry Toner to investigate the role of the health and social care agencies that were involved with the family. Anyone who has

read the Toner report will recognise that the investigation into the role that the health and social care agencies played with the McElhill/McGovern family was extensive and thorough. It identified a number of deficiencies and made 63 recommendations, 55 of which were directed at the Western Trust.

For many people, including Members of the Assembly, today's debate shows that there remains the belief that there are unanswered questions regarding those events. Seven people died at Lammy Crescent. In the minds of many people, for something so terrible to have happened, someone must be to blame and someone should be punished.

The coroner concluded that, on the balance of probabilities, Arthur McElhill and Lorraine McGovern had been up all night. She also concluded that Lorraine McGovern was about to leave and take some of her children with her when the fire was started by Arthur McElhill. All seven members of the family died as a result of the inhalation of fire fumes.

I recognise that there is a significant issue in relation to public confidence, which is why I asked Mr Toner to return to the Western Trust. His role will be to confirm that all of the recommendations in his original report have been implemented, and I expect his findings to be with me by the end of March 2010. Toner's original report identified a number of deficiencies in the performance of social services in particular in the Western Trust area. However, Henry Toner also concluded that there was no evidence that any of those health agencies could have anticipated that the tragic events of 13 November 2007 were about to occur. He said that no reasonable person could have predicted those tragic events.

The protection of children is a key priority for me and for all of us here. The events at Lammy Crescent reinforce what we already know, which is that, overwhelmingly, children come to harm at the hands of people in their own family and friends of the family. We also know that a number of factors are often present in child protection cases, including domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health problems. To some extent, all of those issues appear to have been present in this case. The other major factor is deprivation.

In Northern Ireland today, 100,000 children live in poverty, 40,000 live in households where

there is substance misuse, 11,000 live in families where they witness domestic violence on a daily basis, and many thousands of adults and children across society suffer from depression and other forms of mental health problems. Day and daily, social workers and other healthcare professionals are out there on the ground helping families and children to deal with those issues. Overall, they do an excellent job in extremely difficult circumstances. I am tired of hearing unfair criticism of the dedicated professionals who deal with extremely difficult and sensitive cases. We must never forget the thousands of cases where the intervention of social workers prevented children from coming to harm. Recent research has shown a 38% drop in the number of violent and unexplained deaths of children in England and Wales, and we operate the same system here. Social workers in Northern Ireland continue to make a real difference in the lives of children and families every single day.

Even if we had the best-resourced and most effective service in the world, it would be impossible to ensure that no child or adult would ever come to harm. As Minister, I have sought to target additional resources at child protection, mental health services, domestic violence, substance misuse, and sexual violence. Despite that, those services remain comparatively under-resourced, compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

The inquiry into the role of health and social services in the tragic events at Lammy Crescent identified the lessons that had to be learned.

1.30 pm

It is not for me alone to decide whether a public inquiry should be held. Social services were only one of the agencies involved with the McGovern/McElhill family. The Northern Ireland Office and the police were also monitoring Arthur McElhill as a sex offender. I would not support a public inquiry into the tragedy unless I genuinely believed that it would reveal previously unknown information.

Henry Toner and his team produced an extremely detailed report, which clearly identified failings on the part of social services and other agencies in the Western Trust area. They also made several recommendations in relation to those failings. As a result, and on the basis of actions arising from those areas for which I have responsibility, no substantive

grounds exist for holding a public inquiry into the tragedy. Furthermore, all Members should be mindful of the distressing effect that a public inquiry would have on both families, because of the ongoing and significant media interest in the case. The costs of a public inquiry would have to be met from budgets that are already under pressure. However, if I believed that a public inquiry would address any unanswered questions, and if the Northern Ireland Office and the police felt that an inquiry was required, I would support it.

All our efforts must be aimed at minimising the risk of such terrible events occurring in the future. However, to enable us to protect children and vulnerable adults to the best of our ability, those services must be properly resourced. If any Member seriously believes that the latest proposed £113 million cut in the health and social services budgets will not have a negative impact on those services, he or she is badly mistaken. Historically, family and children's services in Northern Ireland have been under-resourced by some 30% compared with the rest of the UK. Those are not my figures; they were provided by the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I inherited that situation, but the demand for social services has not ceased. Indeed, it continues to grow, and during the past five years, the number of children referred to social services has increased by almost one third.

For the past two and a half years, I have been warning the Assembly about the dangers of underfunding health and social care. As the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I have increased spending on services for children by 14%. That has not eradicated the underfunding of those services, but at least I have attempted to close the gap. That historical underfunding is also the reason why the Department has driven forward improvements. Recently, for example, I secured £3.5 million of additional recurrent funding to help in the recruitment of around 70 more front line social services staff. That extra staffing compliment includes about 30 posts at principal practitioner, social worker, senior practitioner and team leader levels in front line child protection and family intervention teams, and it will, effectively, result in an extra team for each trust. However, those investments are now under threat.

In line with a key Toner recommendation, further posts will be created to assist with public protection arrangements and to enable trusts to discharge their role in monitoring sex offenders. The Department is, for example, funding pilot initiatives that will place social workers in police units in each trust area: the police are not funding that, health and social services are. Those social workers will work closely with the police on improving communication and intervention to help child and adult victims.

Family intervention teams play a crucial role in helping families in need to address problems before they lead to child protection concerns. Those teams undertake more detailed assessments and work with children and families in need, and the majority of the new posts are likely to be in those teams, which also have the most unallocated cases.

Child protection services are in the midst of a substantial and ongoing reform programme to introduce improved assessments of children in need and to ensure that better services are delivered. That programme will address several key weaknesses that were identified by child protection inspections and inquiries into cases, such as the McGovern/McElhill tragedy, in which children died or came to serious harm.

The reform programme includes the introduction of a single assessment tool for children; common standards of supervision for front line staff and recording of files and key documents; improved information sharing; common thresholds of need and intervention; common organisational structures across trusts; a pilot scheme to monitor social workers' caseloads; and new arrangements to embed those standards and guidance into undergraduate training at Northern Ireland's two universities. We also continue to monitor closely the number of unallocated cases in health and social care trusts. Trusts have received investment to help to reduce those cases, and we will continue to monitor that to see what additional actions may be necessary.

I know that, despite that, much more needs to be done. I worry about the level of resourcing that I have been able to deploy into all those services. I can only imagine how much more difficult it is for professionals working on the ground with families and children who desperately need help and support. On previous occasions I have said that, as an Assembly and

an Executive, we must be mature about the difficult choices that we face. How we invest in and protect our children speaks volumes to the outside world about the type of Government that we are and about the sort of country that this is and what we hope it to be in the future. We need to look for opportunities when they arise to try to make things better.

I am awaiting Henry Toner's follow-up report, and I fully expect that to provide assurance that actions have been taken to fully implement all his recommendations in the Western Trust. Members have asked about the outstanding issues that are being worked on in the Department. We still have to complete the child protection guidance, but that is awaiting the new child protection arrangements that will be introduced later this year, which will help to inform the final part of that work. The other outstanding recommendation for the trust is the timely distribution of minutes, which relates to ensuring that minutes of meetings are properly shared among the other agencies. Members have made important points about sharing across agencies in the field of health and social care for which I have a responsibility. That has been one of my key priorities, and the Toner report provides the blueprint and format for that.

That is where we are as far as the Health Service is concerned. I believe that I have taken all reasonable steps in the area of health and social care. However, if the Assembly votes in favour of the motion, I will write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ask them to raise the issue with the Secretary of State.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for taking part in the debate and also for being mindful of the sensitivities around it. I hope that it has been made clear, through the contributions of members of the Health Committee and local representatives, that no one wants an inquiry simply to rake over old ground or to reopen wounds that were beginning to heal. As a Committee, we are very aware that it is not only the families that have been affected but the wider community. We have heard from senior social workers who have been incredibly stressed by events, as well as from local GPs who have evidence of the stress that people in the local community have been under.

The Committee is aware of the number of reviews and reports carried out on the events in question, all of which have been useful and have led to lessons being learned. However, it believes that more could be done and that all the reviews and reports have missed one very important area: how did all the agencies that were involved work together and communicate? The Committee believes that lessons can be learned about that. Inter-agency working is difficult, wherever the setting, but the issue concerns children's lives, and the better that that inter-agency working is done, the better the protection that we can offer children.

The motion calls for an inquiry into the multi-agency aspects of the tragedy: that must be underlined. The Committee believes that that can be done without unnecessarily raking up events of the past. Members have spoken about cost. The Committee does not want to see an expensive inquiry that runs and runs. It has to be time-bound and focused, and it has to consider the multi-agency aspects and how they work together. The Committee is aware that other agencies involved in such an inquiry are likely to be the PSNI, the Probation Board and the Prison Service.

We are aware that a case review took place on the inter-agency handling of Arthur McElhill as a registered sex offender. That review was commissioned by the sex offender strategic management committee and involved those agencies.

The Committee is also aware that it is not within the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to establish such an inquiry, but the Minister can ask the Secretary of State to initiate a review, and we call on him to do so. I welcome the positive comments that the Minister made at the end of his contribution when he said that if the House were to vote in favour of the motion, he would talk to OFMDFM about making that contact and taking the matter forward.

I will now turn to Members' contributions during the debate. Pat Doherty spoke about the sensitivities of the families and of the local area, and he said that he had spoken to both families. Pat has spoken to many of the relevant agencies, and he believes that there is a lack of cohesion among those who work in child protection. He feels that more needs to be done and that a public inquiry is warranted.

John McCallister does not believe that a public inquiry is necessary. He said that the Toner report was wide-ranging and independent and that it covered all the agencies that were involved. The Committee does not dispute the findings of the Toner report, but we believe that lessons need to be learned in collective working, and we want the inquiry to focus on that. Mr McCallister recognised that during the handling of the case and leading up to the tragedy, mistakes were made, such as the fact that it was not ensured that case conferences happened. He said that the Toner report dealt with those mistakes and that an inquiry would serve no purpose. The Committee disputes that.

Dolores Kelly offered condolences to the family, welcomed the lessons that were learned from the Toner inquiry and the Watkins inquiry and paid tribute to the social services staff, who work in difficult conditions. The Minister referred to the unfair criticism of healthcare professionals in social services. The Committee is not for one minute suggesting that those staff should be criticised. We recognise that they do difficult work in difficult conditions. The Committee is not about bashing those staff. Dolores said that the lack of investment in social services was disappointing, and she questioned whether the additional £20 million promised for social care was recycled money or new money.

Sean Neeson said that the community in Omagh had been affected by the 1998 bomb, and he talked about the effect that this tragedy had on the Lammy area. He said that the terrible incident might never have happened if the warning signs had been heeded. Obviously, we cannot suggest that the tragedy would not have happened, but if proper and improved inter-agency work had been taken forward, at least we could have been more sure that the proper procedures had been applied. Mr Neeson supported the motion, but he said that any inquiry should be neither lengthy nor costly.

Thomas Buchanan supported the motion and said that lessons needed to be learned to prevent future tragedies. He welcomed the Toner report's recommendations and asked the Minister to maintain pressure on agencies to make improvements. I welcome the fact that the Western Trust has implemented 53 of the 55 recommendations in the Toner report, but we want improvement in multi-agency working.

Claire McGill, who represents the area, said that the case is complex and has many aspects. She said that the Toner report and the Watkins report looked at those aspects, and she commended the Western Trust for implementing Toner's recommendations, for recognising that mistakes were made and for its willingness to learn from them. Mistakes include misconceptions of the role of other agencies and lack of inter-agency working, and we need to get to the bottom of that.

Tommy Gallagher referred to the great hurt and pain of the families and the communities, but he is not entirely convinced of the need for a public inquiry. He has listened to the public, who were concerned that money spent on an inquiry could be better spent on child protection. Perhaps Tommy misunderstood me when he thought that the Committee was going to conduct an inquiry into child protection. Just to clear the matter up, we are considering a new piece of legislation on safeguarding.

Basil McCrea said that local politicians have a level of oversight for the PSNI. The PSNI has told me that its decision-making protocols would not have changed. Members of the public have suggested that the improvements that have been put in place are not working, but the message must be sent clearly to the public that we are taking the issue of child protection seriously and that we want to improve inter-agency working. Although individual agencies might have done their jobs, they did not do that collectively.

1.45 pm

I now turn to the Minister's comments. He said that responsibility for this is not down to him alone, and the Committee accepts that other agencies need to step up and take responsibility. The Minister said that he has done all that he can in asking the Toner inquiry to go back to the Western Trust and to provide him with an update on how the recommendations have been taken forward. We obviously welcome that, but we believe that all the other agencies need to take responsibility. We need to minimise risk, and that is what the Committee aims to do. Nobody can say for sure that an event like this will never be repeated. However, we must be confident that we have taken forward all the measures that we can to ensure that best practice is in place and that people work more efficiently together. We

welcome all the improvements that have taken place in the Western Trust and across the board in the Department.

We fully recognise the difficulties that professionals face in doing their job. The Minister talked about public confidence — that is what today's Committee motion is about. We want to ensure that there is public confidence in all the agencies that are involved in child protection. Child protection is a key priority for every Member in the House, including the Minister.

As I said earlier, the Minister talked about unfair criticism. I want to again put on record — I said this when I proposed the motion — that I commend the good work of the social services, because, quite often, that work goes unrecognised. The Minister said that the tragedy might not have been prevented, even if the best resources or systems had been in place at the time, and, of course, we agree with that. However, we need to be confident that we have taken all the steps and precautions that we possibly can, because this tragic event cannot be allowed to be repeated. We must be sure that we take all possible steps to improve systems and practice, and multi-agency working needs to be improved to maximise any chance of that.

I welcome the Minister's closing remarks that he will write to OFMDFM to ask that it raise the issue of the way forward with the Secretary of State. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to seek to secure the agreement of the Secretary of State to initiate a time-bound public inquiry into the multi-agency aspects of the McElhill/McGovern tragedy in Omagh.

Private Members' Business

Schools Estate

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 D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the need for newbuild and ongoing maintenance to ensure provision of a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century; recognises the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a procurement mechanism is in place, which expedites the provision of capital projects, and that adequate funds are provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an rún seo a mholadh.

I am pleased to propose the motion to the House. It was tabled at a time when we were not aware of the swingeing cuts that all Departments now face. At that time, we knew about the huge backlog in schools maintenance that amounts to about £240 million. That amount is equivalent to a host of new primary and secondary schools, and it clearly points to the poor state of the schools estate.

The Minister says that she is aiming to create a world-class education system. How can we have a world-class education system when the schools estate is evidently in need of so much repair? Some will argue that it is not the school buildings that count but the quality of the teaching and learning that take place within them. However, if Members speak to teachers in recently refurbished or newbuild schools, they will hear about the clear, positive effects of modern, up-to-date facilities for the pupils and staff, and, indeed, for the way in which those schools are viewed in the local community.

Some teachers have to work in outdated and outmoded buildings with facilities that have long been in need of replacement. Past pupils, who have long left school, say that newbuild and refurbishment were promised during their school days, only to come to nothing.

The procurement process for newbuilds is extremely frustrating for education providers, staff, parents and pupils. Usually, dates are given and projections are made, only for those to be dishonoured and delayed by further bureaucratic stalling. Not only are newbuilds slow at coming on stream but basic, badly needed repairs are not being done and are piling up, year on year. The longer that repairs are left undone, the more the schools estate deteriorates and the worse the conditions in which children and teachers have to work. The longer that maintenance is delayed, the greater the bill will be. Lack of investment now is a false economy, and, in the long term, the cost will be even greater.

We are told that further pressures on this year's education budget mean that no newbuilds will go on site in 2010-11. At least, that is what senior officials from the Department of Education (DE) told the Committee on several occasions. However, what they tell us varies, to some extent, from what the Minister tells us. On Wednesday 3 February, the Minister appeared before the Committee for Education, and she said that that is not the case and that, depending on the outcome of the ongoing strategic review, there may be some newbuilds during the coming year. Such mixed messages emanating from the Department are frustrating and disappointing for the teachers, pupils and parents associated with schools, such as those in my constituency — in Forkill, Drumantine, Maddan, Carrick, and so on — which were promised that their newbuild would be on site in spring 2010. They want to know whether that is true, but the messages from the Department are mixed: “no” from the officials but “maybe” from the Minister.

Many Members are aware of similar situations in their constituencies, and they will also be disappointed that no building work will be done in the coming year. That is largely due to a £22 million cutback in the Department's capital budget, alongside a £52 million reduction in the Department's resource budget.

On 14 January 2010, the Minister kindly wrote to the Committee:

“to obtain the views of the Education Committee on how we can deliver these savings and address pressures within the overall context of my priorities for education.”

A cynic might say that the Minister is quite willing to invite the Committee to help her to

make cuts but that, when money was available for investment, she was happy to do that without the Committee's help.

The Minister and her officials outlined five areas in which savings can be made to make up for the shortfall in resources. Those include reductions in bureaucracy in Classroom 2000 (C2k), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the entitlement framework and the school improvement programme.

All those issues are associated with the resource budget, but we have no detailed information on the Minister's plans for the capital resource. We know that her Department would need in the region of £70 million to progress the 100 or so schemes that are still in the pipeline. Under present economic conditions, that resource will not be available.

We need to know the results of the strategic review of the capital programme that the Minister has undertaken. Schools that are awaiting projects will expect to know where they stand, and it is important that there be a clear and transparent process. Having already received mixed messages from the Department, I would like the Minister to tell us what lies in store for the new school building programme. Is the review finished? If not, when will it be finished? What criteria will she use to determine the projects that will go ahead and those that will not? The Minister may wish to tell us how much resource she intends to set aside for minor works and for much-needed maintenance respectively. Those are very important areas, especially at a time of slowdown in capital spend.

After the High Court ruling on the schools modernisation framework agreement for tendering procedures, which was originally aimed at expediting new school builds, will the Minister tell us what her Department is doing to accelerate the procurement process? It is important that we get an answer to that question.

As we all know, the education and skills authority (ESA) was originally designed to save £20 million a year, which would go to front line services. Some of the money that was originally intended for the ESA has had to be submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel because of delays. I am sure that that has had a knock-on effect in other budget areas.

Once again, I remind the House of how important it is that our teachers and pupils work and learn in the best possible facilities. That is not the case at present, and, with an outstanding bill for maintenance of £240 million, it is imperative that we continue to invest in the schools estate in order to aim to have the best possible facilities available to our children and to our teachers. Gabhaim buíochas leat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as an deis seo a thabhairt domh labhairt ar an ábhar seo.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):

The Committee receives regular briefings on the education budget from senior officials in the Department of Education. On 18 November 2009, the Committee questioned departmental officials on how the £70 million capital requirement for 2010-11 would be addressed. The Committee also asked how further additional efficiencies in the Executive's spending plans for 2010-11, which amount to some £22 million of capital pressure or 11.5% of the 2010-11 educational capital budget, would be found. As Mr Bradley mentioned, the question of the £240 million deficit in the maintenance budget also arose.

In their response, departmental officials said that the Minister was reviewing capital expenditure plans and that information would be available to the Committee early in 2010. The Committee then heard from the officials that, in the absence of any additional capital funding, the Department of Education would not release any further new capital projects into 2010-11 and would cease work on bringing new projects into the process. However, the Minister seemed to be at variance with her officials on that issue when she met the Committee last week, and we would appreciate it if she could provide clarity to the House today on that issue.

2.00 pm

The Committee was also concerned about a specific DE briefing on the Department's capital spending programme at its meeting on 9 December. It confirmed the serious position of the capital programme, which will be restricted in 2010-11 to minor works spend that is needed to meet statutory requirements. The Committee reaffirmed its request for information on the Minister's review of the capital programme. Moreover, the Committee had serious concerns when it was informed of the £240 million backlog of requests for maintenance from schools.

The Committee received a letter dated 14 January 2010 from the Minister setting out the Executive draft proposals and plans for 2010-11, which identified £22 million in capital expenditure reductions. However, the letter proposed no measures to address the problem or to highlight the serious position of the education capital programme in 2010-11. That was a serious deficiency in the correspondence. Furthermore, the Committee has received no information on the Minister's review of the education capital programme, even though it asked officials in December to provide the criteria for selection of capital projects and any proposed outcomes. The Committee understands and is concerned that the Minister is reviewing the capital programme on the basis of how projects fit with her policies on area-based planning and the entitlement framework.

I will now move to issues that I have as a Member of the House. I declare my membership of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School. I urgently need an assurance from the Minister that there will be movement on capital projects in 2010-11. In my constituency, Ballymoney High School has been waiting for six years, and as the proposer of the motion said, I hope that the Minister will not target schools on the basis of non-compliance with her priorities.

We are not here about the priorities of an individual Minister; we should be here about the priorities for education in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is totally unacceptable that this Minister is overseeing a review of capital build programmes, yet has not informed the Education Committee, to date, about the criteria that she is using. The Minister told the Committee that the information will be disclosed at the appropriate time, which will be after she has made the decisions and has choreographed the estate in the education system to create losers instead of winners. I want the Minister to tell the House what the situation at Ballymoney High School is today, and what is happening with the capital programme for Ballycastle High School, which is held up as an example of cross-community collaboration?

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Finally, will the Minister bring to the House a decision about —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:
— Garryduff Primary School outside the village of Dunloy —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:
— in my constituency, which has been waiting for seven years —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr John O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an rún.

I support the motion. It would be difficult for anyone to speak against the intent of the motion, which calls for more finance for a school build programme and for a procurement policy for a build programme. We are all aware that the previous procurement procedures were challenged successfully in the courts and had to be revised. That caused a considerable delay to building projects across the North.

It is not surprising that MLAs will rise to speak about schools in their constituencies, because many schools across all constituencies require newbuilds or major renovation works to ensure that our children are taught in a welcoming, safe and open environment.

I have looked jealously at some of the schools that I have visited across the North, especially Holy Cross College in Strabane, which opened recently. Anyone who visits that school can only be impressed by the facilities that are available to its pupils, and I wish them all the best for the future.

I welcome the education debate. Observers of the debate might come to the view that nothing else matters in education other than the transfer procedure, having listened to the media and certain politicians who, when they make their single transferable speech on education, are referring to the 11-plus and can offer no broader policy proposals beyond that issue. Today's debate is refreshing from that point of view.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Would it not be advisable that the Member inform the Minister that, when it comes to devising policies on capital, she should take the transfer procedure out of the equation? It is obvious that she is judging schools on the merits of a policy that is based on transfer 2010. That does have something to do with the transfer procedure. While I am on my feet, I

congratulate the children who, at the weekend, received the results that prove that academic selection is here to stay.

Mr O'Dowd: I often speak to the Minister about many issues and will continue to do so. Surely all Departments are run on the basis of policy. I would be shocked if, for instance, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) was being run on policies to which its Minister did not adhere. It is foolish to suggest that Departments are not being run according to their existing policies.

I add my congratulations to the children who sat the tests and got their results at the weekend, regardless of what those results were. I wish all the children who are transferring to post-primary schools in the autumn the best of luck in their educational future, regardless of whether they sat a test.

We are now entering the realm of what the public call bread-and-butter politics. As local politicians, we will have to make some difficult decisions in the months and years ahead. The recent Budget cuts that were agreed by the Executive are only the beginning of a hard fiscal period for the Assembly and for society as a whole. If we are to continue to table motions on spending, we must craft them in a way that suits our political train of thought and offers viable and credible fiscal alternatives. That is where the debate is going and where the general public expect us as politicians —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just give me one second, Dolores.

The general public expect that we, as politicians, will ensure that in tabling motions we offer an alternative. All Ministers could stand up and do what Margaret Ritchie does — I congratulate Margaret on her election as leader of the SDLP — all Ministers could stand up and say that they cannot do their job because they need more money. That rhetoric is no longer satisfactory. We have to plan a way forward with the limited fiscal capacity that we have.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member outline why Sinn Féin is not challenging its partners in the DUP to open the books on the Budget and the Programme for Government? In light of the difficult economic climate, will they have a real look at this year's Budget and Programme for Government?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member for Upper Bann checks, she will discover that Margaret Ritchie is not only the leader of the SDLP but a member of the Executive. The Executive discussed in detail the required £300 million of savings and the Programme for Government and agreed the Budget in detail. All Statutory Committees, including the Committee that is chaired by the Member, are scrutinising Budget bids by their respective Departments. It is not Sinn Féin's fault if the Member has not seen the Budget; it is her own fault. Even as a Committee Chairperson, she should be analysing in detail the Department of the Environment's budget. If she is not, she should be asking serious questions of her fellow Committee members.

Back to the point in hand —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I have only a few moments left.

I welcome the motion but, if we are to move forward in serious political debate and offer alternatives, not only should we table motions —

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

Mr O'Dowd: Members must table motions that outline how those alternatives can happen.

Mr B McCrea: It has really surprised me that no one has been talking about education over the past week. We have been at Hillsborough talking about parades, policing and justice, a new future and how we are all going to get on together so much better. Yet no one has mentioned education.

As Mr O'Dowd said, this is real politics. We are in one unholy mess. Last year —

Mr McEluff: Will the Member accept that Reg Empey, who is a party colleague of his, is the Minister responsible for further and higher education? If education is in a mess, that is an indictment of his own colleague.

Mr B McCrea: It is always good to hear from the honourable Member on the opposite Benches, and it is good to hear that he is as entertaining as usual. I am not sure what point he is making, but thanks anyway, Barry.

The issue comes along —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, I ask Members to make their remarks through the

Chair. If it continues, I will name the Member and ask him to go.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The question comes back to education. I am keen to debate education. I am keen to work out why we were able to spend £250 million on capital projects last year and why we will spend nothing in this incoming year. Decisions have to be made. I also want to know why we do not have £100 million for revenue budgets. I want to discuss those issues.

The Committee for Education receives presentations from departmental officials giving it those facts. However, the facts are then apparently countermanded by the Minister, meaning that all we get is confusion. It is not possible to talk about these matters sensibly if we do not have the proper information.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I have only five minutes in which to speak.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Mr O'Dowd's logic says that we should help to identify problems. His own Minister sent the Committee for Education a letter asking it to help the Department to identify problems. It is, therefore, obvious that even the Minister does not know what she wants to do about the education cuts that have to be made.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Bradley will make the winding-up speech, so I am sorry that I cannot take his intervention.

I agree with Mr Storey. This is what the people of Northern Ireland are talking about. They want to know what is happening to our schools. Many of the schools in which our children are taught are substandard. We have to make some arrangement whereby we continue to replace schools that are below the necessary standard, and, if we have to, we must make the appropriate hard decisions. That means some form of closure of schools that are, perhaps, not in the right place. Certainly, we have to recognise that we want to ensure that everyone has equality of opportunity. If we are to make those hard decisions, we have to get together. It is not possible for one of us to come forward, whether that is the Minister or someone else,

and say that they will deal with the matter in their way and that no one else is to be involved.

I am struck by Mr O'Dowd's admonishment that we will have to look for a way to find the money. The next motion on the Order Paper, which is about a health issue and which Mr O'Dowd's party tabled, calls for precisely what he is telling us not to do. He is telling us not to come forward with proper plans. That is exactly the point. Perhaps the Member should reflect on that.

The issue comes down to how we deal with the finance. We need to take a long, hard look at where waste and inefficiencies exist in the system. We understand that the money is not there. I was not sure whether I could support the motion, given that it calls for money that we know is not there. However, we must find a way forward and do something for the sake of our children and investment in the future.

To that end, can we not, please, remove all the confusion, unacceptable delay, prevarication and inquiries? Nobody really knows whether certain schools will be built. A long list was issued years ago, and we do not know whether those schools will be built. That is unacceptable, it is cruel, and it is not fair. Those are all the things that politicians should not be doing. We must bring some form of clarity. I make this pledge: the Ulster Unionist Party will respond sensitively and appropriately in trying to work out a solution for all people in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

I am sure that the Minister will speak about ESA, but my party supports it, provided that its purpose is to streamline and improve efficiencies. We had a problem with ESA when it became a super-quango that was going to tell everyone what to do. If those issues are addressed, we will support it. Finally, when we consider cross-party working groups, such as those dealing with the transfer issue, why will Sinn Féin not join us? We have had working groups left, right and centre on the efficiency of the Executive, on trying to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr B McCrea: Why not have a working party on education?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr B McCrea: Why will Sinn Féin not work with the rest of us for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Lunn: A quieter contribution is coming up. I support the motion. Even John O'Dowd agrees that we should support it. The need for newbuilds and ongoing maintenance of schools is self-evident. If one were to ask the head teacher of Lagan College if she needs a newbuild, she would say that the school would probably have to fall down before it is rebuilt. If one were to ask in Magherafelt, one would be told that a new school has been promised and will not go ahead. If one is looking for a maintenance example, one could talk to a head teacher on the Springfield Road who regards himself now as more a plumber and electrician than a head teacher.

I notice that the motion refers to a procurement mechanism to expedite the provision of capital projects. That is fair enough: we should have a good, efficient procurement mechanism. However, if it were speeded up at the moment, it would probably make things worse, because it would mean that more projects were coming forward with even less money to provide for them. If the strategic review turns a "maybe" into a possibility of one newbuild, that will probably be the height of it. The backlog of maintenance work required is critical and is getting worse. It is bound to get worse.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

An example was highlighted to me the other day in which a school needs repairs done to windows, but, in order to spend the money before 31 March, they are tarmacking the yard at the back to provide additional car parking spaces. That shows that the Minister is not even in control of the processes that she governs.

Mr Lunn: The maintenance budget deficit of £240 million can only get worse. If I remember correctly, the £30 million expenditure figure this year has been reduced from £90 million, which might have made a dent in the problem. Trying to pay off £240 million at £30 million a year will not get easier. That figure of £240 million will probably rise. However, it is not a new problem. At the risk of appearing to defend the current Minister, I will say that this has been going on under direct rule and under the previous Minister. It is a cumulative situation, which has now come to a head.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No, I have already given way once. All right; I will. Go ahead.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member very much. The whole point of devolved administration was that we would have control of our own affairs and make a difference to people on the ground. It is a failure of devolved administration if we cannot get that right.

Mr Lunn: Getting a handle on our own affairs would be all very well if we also had control of our own money. However, the money coming through is being reduced, not increased.

Mr McCarthy: Wait until the Tories get their hands on it.

Mr Kennedy: You would put up our own taxes, Kieran.

Mr Lunn: Every Department wants to get something out of the money that is coming through, and every Department has to take a cut this year. It is not a new problem, and it is hardly a surprise that we are faced with this situation. The only way to solve it, and I find myself agreeing with Basil McCrea occasionally —

Mr Kennedy: Steady now.

Mr Lunn: I know.

Mr McCallister: Resign. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: It needs to be —

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order.

Mr McElduff: I hope it is too. A conversation seems to be taking place involving several Members in sedentary positions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not a point of order. However, I am pleased that the Member made that point, because I have been trying to do so. Some Members are overcome by their own verbosity.

Mr Lunn: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am heartily glad that Mr McElduff made that point. If you stood here and tried to speak on a regular basis, you would realise just how difficult it can be.

Anyway, I will try to return to the issue. We need to tackle the problem at its source. We need to have a proper go at dealing with the entire

issue of area-based planning rather than just tinkering with it. We need to look at the issue of sustainable schools: there are too many sectors, too many empty desks and too many systems. I am pointing towards the ESA. I hope that the outbreak of goodwill which seemed to occur on Friday like some sort of miracle will be extended.

I hope that the working group that will look at the business that has been stuck in the Executive logjam will speedily clear the way for a proper discussion about the ESA, because that is the vehicle that could produce efficiency. In addition to the £20 million saving through its own operation, it could help to bring about a root-and-branch review of the entire system to try to make some sense of the situation. I am also glad to hear that the Ulster Unionists appear to support the ESA again. Their support has been on and off, but I am glad that it is on again, even if it is subject to caveats and restrictions.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Lunn: I am finished, Basil, so you will not be able to make an intervention.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion. It asks us to recognise the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation. The economic downturn has had a devastating impact on jobs, particularly in the construction industry. The construction industry accounted for 44% — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. A complaint was made recently about conversations. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that the Member will bear that in mind. I apologise, Miss McIlveen. Continue.

Miss McIlveen: The construction industry accounted for 44% of the rise in unemployment in December 2009. According to DETI claimant count figures, 13,245 claimants came from the construction sector. As a response to that problem, I understand that the Executive's gross capital investment during 2009-2010 will be in excess of £1.7 billion, which is an unprecedented level of government investment. I am referring to the parts of the motion that have not yet been addressed.

I understand that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his predecessor have

been working alongside construction industry stakeholders to address concerns relating to improving opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to access public procurement and information regarding future government construction works and services. Such measures would go some way to addressing the concerns expressed in the motion about a procurement mechanism and the expedition of capital projects from the point of view of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). However, the relevant Departments must provide information regarding capital projects and the timing of those works.

I am slightly disappointed in the motion. There is no doubt that the Assembly will pass the motion, and, indeed, it will no doubt receive unanimous support. From listening to the contributions to the debate, it is obvious that Members recognise the need for newbuild schools and ongoing maintenance at schools. I am sure that we are all united in our wish not only to protect but to create jobs in our construction industry and that we all wish that adequate funds were available for a host of things. In coming weeks, we will no doubt see recurrent motions calling for various Departments to be given adequate funds for a host of projects.

What disappoints me about the motion is that it does not address the fundamental issue: the Minister's handling of her Budget. As we have heard, schools around Northern Ireland have been earmarked for newbuilds and extensions. Those are all at different stages and, previously, would have been given an indication of when work would commence. However, given the current financial situation, Members, the schools and the construction industry do not know whether finance is available or when it might be made so. All those groups need certainty about what is happening.

As has been mentioned, we have known for some time that financial cuts are coming, and, since December, we have been made aware of how severe they would be. In that same month, the Committee was told that there would be a review of the capital programme, and we expected its results early in the new year. We have yet to receive them.

The Minister has now decided that she will come to the Committee and ask us where we think the axe should fall. Without doubt, she

has treated the Committee with contempt over the last two and a half years, and now she asks us to provide cover for her. Perhaps we should not be so cynical; perhaps we should see it as a new start for the Minister. She may be embarking on a new path on which, in the future, she will be much more co-operative with the Committee.

In a spirit of co-operation, I ask that the Minister provide the clarity required by the Assembly, the schools and the builders. Will she advise the Assembly of the criteria for her review of the capital programme and of the results of that review? Will she tell the Assembly at which of the schools earmarked for maintenance, newbuilds and extensions work will proceed and at which work is placed on hold? Can she tell us how long the projects put on hold will remain that way? Can she confirm that no new projects will be commenced in 2010-11? Can she confirm that those projects already on site will proceed? Can she reassure us that full equality impact assessments have been or will be carried out in respect of decisions on whether projects should proceed or be placed on hold?

I look forward to the Minister's response to those questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when Mr Mitchel McLaughlin will be the next Member to speak.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

OFMDFM: Budget 2010-11

1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their 2010-11 budget. (AQO 663/10)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): In the 2008-2011 Budget, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was allocated £86.4 million of current expenditure and £17.3 million of capital for the 2010-11 financial year. On 12 January 2010 in the Assembly, the Finance Minister announced the outcome of the Executive's review of their 2010-11 spending plans. The Executive's proposals, which were issued for consultation by the Finance Minister, proposed a £4.1 million reduction in OFMDFM's resource allocation and a £5.2 million reduction in its capital allocation for 2010-11.

Subject to the outcome of the consultation exercise, OFMDFM's revised budget allocations for 2010-11 will be £82.3 million of current expenditure and £12.1 million of capital. We are considering a number of options for delivering the budget reductions proposed in the Executive's review of their 2010-11 spending plans. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be briefed on our proposals for the delivery of the 2010-11 budget reductions as soon as our considerations are complete.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister indicate the implications for the number of staff in the Department?

The deputy First Minister: It has implications, undoubtedly, but we are considering options for delivering the additional savings agreed by the Executive for OFMDFM in the review of their 2010-11 spending plans. Following a bilateral meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 19 November 2009 to discuss OFMDFM's

2010-11 administration cost pressures, the First Minister and I agreed to develop a robust plan to address those pressures through a reduction in the Department's headcount.

The departmental restructuring plan will deliver efficiencies of 51 OFMDFM full-time employees (FTEs), which will bring OFMDFM's staffing level at 1 April 2010, or as soon as possible thereafter, to 314 FTEs. The proposals will deliver estimated annual administration cost savings of £2.3 million. All OFMDFM staff have been advised of the staffing reductions in a minute from the head of the Civil Service.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to question the deputy First Minister. Will he explain the absence of his Department's revised expenditure plans to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in advance of tomorrow's plenary meeting?

The deputy First Minister: As I said earlier, we are considering a number of options for delivering the budget reductions proposed in the Executive's review of their 2010-11 spending plans. It includes an assessment of any impacts on our obligations to promote equality, good relations and social inclusion. Obviously, that takes time. I do not want to speculate on the potential impact of the plans on any part of the Department until we have completed our consideration of the issues and briefed the OFMDFM Committee.

Mr Attwood: Given that it appears that we are now moving with more certainty towards the devolution of justice and policing, will the Minister confirm the budget line for the proposed office of Attorney General in the 2010-11 budget plan? Will he share with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister the report that he and Peter Robinson received last September, nearly five months ago, about the future shape and role of the Attorney General's office —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Attwood: — so that all of us may be in a place to better understand what the devolution of justice will look like when it comes?

The deputy First Minister: I am very pleased that the Member has adopted such a

progressive and constructive approach to the transfer of policing and justice powers. I do not have the figures for the cost implications for the office of the Attorney General off the top of my head, but I will write to the Member with them.

Ms Lo: Last month, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) confirmed to me that it has received almost £1 million from the UK migration impacts fund for this year, and I understand that the fund will run for a second year in 2010-11. Will the Minister state whether any of that money was given to OFMDFM to help those migrant workers who have no recourse to public funds? Will OFMDFM receive any more money for next year?

The deputy First Minister: That will be part of an ongoing discussion between OFMDFM and DFP. When we know the outcome of that discussion, we will write to the Member.

Central Advertising Unit

2. **Ms Purvis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much was spent by the central advertising unit on newspaper advertising in the last three years; and whether competitive tendering practices are always followed to ensure that the best possible price is obtained for such advertising. (AQO 664/10)

The deputy First Minister: The central advertising unit holds figures for the amounts spent on newspaper advertising by Departments, their agencies and non-departmental public bodies. The total amounts for the past three years are £8.7 million for 2006-07, £9.6 million for 2007-08 and £8.4 million for 2008-09. That amounts to more than £26 million over the past three years on classified advertising — public notices and recruitment — and campaign advertising.

The differing natures of the two types of advertising mean that different approaches are required. A competitive tendering process that was applied to classified advertising in 2006 resulted in a lengthy court challenge by some newspapers. Given the level of expenditure and the ongoing pressures on departmental budgets, we recently agreed to carry out an interim review of the policy on classified advertising. That review, to be undertaken by OFMDFM officials, will include some of the highest-spending Departments, with support from the Central Procurement Directorate.

The approach to campaign advertising is different. Competitive rates for government have been negotiated with each of the main media organisations. That approach now delivers improved value for money, with incremental savings last year estimated at more than £660,000.

All aspects of the tendering process must comply with procurement guidelines.

Ms Purvis: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. When will that interim review on classified advertising be completed and published? Is a value-for-money review of all government advertising planned?

The deputy First Minister: The review is ongoing. I do not have a date for its completion, but we wish to expedite it. We are all conscious of the need to ensure that public money is used properly. A tendering process was run for classified advertising in daily newspapers. After the results became known, three local newspapers combined in a legal challenge to stop its implementation.

The case never came to judgement. As the length of time that subsequently passed rendered rates and other marketplace data out of date, the newspapers agreed to drop the case on the basis that the approach would be re-examined. That re-examination is now under way.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the role of the central advertising unit?

The deputy First Minister: The unit applies specialist expertise to improve the value for money and effectiveness of advertising for all Departments. In 2008-09, the unit cost £398,000 to run and delivered savings of more than £1 million. The unit has 12 posts: nine in Belfast and three in Derry. Last year, the Derry team handled almost 7,500 classified ads worth £2.6 million. It recently achieved a 100% customer satisfaction rating across seven performance areas. The Belfast team delivered 18 advertising campaigns, each of which had clear objectives and measures of effectiveness.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister outline how much was spent on the development of the Executive's website? In light of its being virtually a replica of the Directgov website in the United Kingdom, was there a tendering process?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have that information to hand, but we will write to the Member with it.

Child Poverty

3. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they plan to use the Financial Assistance Act 2009 or to set up an Executive programme fund to ensure that the Executive meet their targets in relation to child poverty. (AQO 665/10)

The deputy First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Kelly will answer that question.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The tackling of poverty and disadvantage is a priority in the Programme for Government, and it is a theme that cuts across departmental boundaries. Child poverty is an integral part of the overall work to tackle poverty and disadvantage, and specific child poverty targets have been set in the Programme for Government. To ensure that resources and efforts are directed to those in greatest need when allocating resources to programmes, Departments are required, in line with normal public expenditure guidelines, to consider available data and research on poverty, including child poverty.

It is the responsibility of the Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion to agree the priorities and the key Executive actions that are necessary to meet child poverty targets. To that end, Ministers have asked officials to work with colleagues from other Departments to identify the priority actions that are required to benefit those groups, including children who are in greatest objective need. The Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion is due to meet shortly to consider the outcomes of those cross-departmental discussions and associated proposals for priority action.

Once priorities are agreed by the Executive subcommittee, it will be for the Executive to consider and decide how those priorities should be implemented and resourced. In the Executive's considerations, they will consider non-legislative options before legislative methods such as the Financial Assistance Act 2009.

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

Will the junior Minister consider, through his good offices on the subcommittee on children and young people and the subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion, whether money in dormant bank accounts could be used to create a dedicated fund to address child poverty?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): We recognise that legislative proposals for dormant bank accounts represent an opportunity for the Executive to target additional resources at tackling social need through the Big Lottery Fund. We look forward to the outcome of the Department of Finance and Personnel's consultation process, which ended in October 2009.

Mrs Long: Has there been any progress in resolving the dispute between the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about school-age childcare, which the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister identified as one of the main barriers to people's being economically active and, therefore, to their being able to lift their families out of poverty?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): We were due to meet the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week, and we will meet it next week. I do not have precise information now, but we will have it when we meet the Committee.

Mr Cree: To ensure that any distribution of financial assistance funds is seen to be fair and equitable, what steps and protocols has the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister put in place to determine the relative priority of each government programme that has suffered from cutbacks that inhibit the achievement of preset targets?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): To date, the Executive subcommittee has met on two occasions, during which it reached conclusions about the agreed terms of reference. In addition, it has been informed about the extent of poverty here, and it has agreed the work that should be undertaken to identify the key co-ordinated priority actions that are needed to benefit areas, groups and individuals, particularly families and children in greatest objective need. We considered and agreed initial proposals for a monitoring and reporting

framework for the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, which we adopted more than two years ago as the overall architecture of our approach to poverty and social inclusion. Furthermore, we agreed to the early re-establishment of the Minister-led poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum, which is another accountability mechanism.

2.45 pm

The third meeting of the Executive's subcommittee is due to be held shortly. The meeting that was scheduled for 17 December 2009 was cancelled due to an extended Executive meeting. A new date is to be agreed. At that meeting, Ministers will consider further proposals on priority action areas, as well as the monitoring and reporting of a framework for lifetime opportunities.

Promoting Social Inclusion: Disability

4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the report of the promoting social inclusion working group on disability will be taken forward. (AQO 666/10)

The deputy First Minister: On 3 December 2009, the promoting social inclusion working group on disability presented a report to the First Minister and me at an event in Belfast City Hall. When we accepted that working group's report, we committed to taking it to Executive colleagues to seek their response. The report has already been agreed by Departments at official level. The next step will be to discuss and agree a formal Executive response to the report's recommendations. Following that, we will carry out a consultation exercise on the response. The response to the report will form an important part of the Government's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and it will promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities in line with our statutory and equality duties.

We have already provided a copy of the report to the OFMDFM Committee and have agreed that the Committee should be provided the opportunity to comment on the Executive's response in due course.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the deputy First Minister's response. Can he assure the House that every effort is being made to end discrimination and the abuse that people with disabilities sometimes face in day-to-day society? Departments have been almost silent

on disability discrimination compared with other forms of discrimination on, for example, grounds of race or religion.

The deputy First Minister: The report's key vision is of a future in which people with disabilities contribute to and benefit from cultural, social, political and economic life on an equal basis with others. We in OFMDFM absolutely agree with that. It is essential that any Government, particularly any that we are part of, recognise the need to ensure that everybody in society has the ability to achieve their full potential. We are absolutely committed to taking that work forward through to the Executive and on to consultation in the total belief that, on the other side of the process, we will have devised an approach and a strategy that recognise that people with disabilities must be treated with respect and have the unequivocal support of all Departments under our tutelage.

Mr McDevitt: Does the deputy First Minister agree that the best protection that this region could offer people with disabilities would be a strong and inclusive bill of rights? Do he and his Office agree with the SDLP that the British Government's proposal for a bill of rights, which is currently out to consultation, is defective and falls far short of the ambitions of this region and of the Good Friday Agreement?

The deputy First Minister: I will speak now on my own behalf and as a member of Sinn Féin, rather than on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. My party has registered its strong opposition to the approach that the British Government have taken. I would be surprised if many other Assembly parties did not share some of the concerns of Sinn Féin and the SDLP, and, indeed, those of many other people who are involved in community and voluntary work.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the deputy First Minister's answers. If he wants to take those efforts a step further, there is nowhere better to promote inclusion of people with disabilities than the Building itself. Last week, I attended a conference to which people with disabilities were denied entrance through the front door of the Building. Why should people with disabilities not be permitted to enter through the front door of Northern Ireland's Parliament Buildings? They were sidelined to a side door. I ask the Minister to take that on board.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must point out to the Member that his question is for the Assembly Commission, not for the deputy First Minister. We shall move on to question 5.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker —

Mr Speaker: Mr McCarthy, it is clear that your supplementary question related to the Assembly Commission's responsibilities in and around the Building.

We will move on. Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Equality Commission

6. **Mr Campbell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the publication of the latest fair employment monitoring report by the Equality Commission, if they intend to hold discussions with the Equality Commission regarding the under-representation of Protestants in organisations which come under their remit, including the Equality Commission itself. (AQO 668/10)

The deputy First Minister: All specified public bodies, including the Department and its agencies, are legally required by the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998 to monitor the community background of their workforces. The Order also places a duty on them to conduct a review, at least once every three years, of their employment composition and employment practices. The purpose of the review is to determine whether both communities enjoy fair participation in employment. Where that does not appear to be the case, employers may take affirmative action measures to attract members of the under-represented community into their employment.

The Equality Commission has in place an affirmative action programme designed to redress the imbalance of representation in its staff. That includes the use of a statement in all job advertisements welcoming members of the Protestant community; contacts with schools and third-level educational establishments; contact with, and forwarding job vacancy information to, community organisations servicing the Protestant community; and engagement with representatives and people with influence in the Protestant community. Officials maintain regular contact with the commission to keep the situation under review.

Mr Campbell: I note that there was an admission that some work goes on in bodies in which there is an under-representation of one community or another, but there was no admission that the Equality Commission is one of those bodies. Yet, the facts are there; they are undeniable. The figures involved are quite small, but other figures regarding recruitment of Protestants to many major public sector bodies are equally undeniable; many thousands of them are denied equality of opportunity. When is the deputy First Minister going to waken up to that reality and address his mind to trying to resolve it?

The deputy First Minister: I remind the Member that when he asks a question of me, he is asking a question of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I also remind him that, in my earlier answer, I said that the Equality Commission has in place an affirmative action programme that is designed to redress the imbalance of representation in its staff. I must point out that when I was 15 years of age, I was a victim of religious discrimination, so I know all about it, and under no circumstances would I tolerate any section of our community being discriminated against because of religion.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister accept that it is important that the employment profile in the North reflects equality of opportunity, and that equality means equality for everyone in this society, not for one community over another?

The deputy First Minister: I absolutely agree that it is vital for the employment profile in the North to fully reflect equality of opportunity, particularly in the public sector. Some good progress has been made to ensure a more fully representative employment profile across the public and private sectors. That has been due not least to the pressure for more effective fair employment legislation and implementation. However, there is still some way to go, and there remain worrying levels of structural inequality across wider society.

Mr K Robinson: I listened very carefully to what the deputy First Minister was saying about recruitment. Does he believe that the time has now come to take indicative action, along the lines of the 50:50 recruitment policy for the PSNI, to redress some of the long-standing under-representations of the Protestant community in sections of the public sector?

The deputy First Minister: The difficulty is that, if we went right across the North, we would be able to pick out all sorts of examples of people being under-represented, whether in the Protestant community in regard to some situations, or in the Catholic community in regard to others. I want to get away from talking about the issue in the context of Protestant or Catholic. We must recognise that all citizens have rights, and we have to ensure that, as we move forward, there is equality of opportunity for everybody.

We are dealing with a one-off situation in respect of the PSNI. Throughout the decades, since the partition of Ireland, there has been under-representation in the police for many reasons. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: I will not turn this into a political debate, because I could stand and talk about the subject for the next two hours without any difficulty.

North/South Parliamentary Forum

7. **Mr Gallagher** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the proposed creation of a North/South parliamentary forum to advance political understanding and wider opportunities on the island of Ireland. (AQO 669/10)

The deputy First Minister: Agreement to establish a North/South parliamentary forum is a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas. The issue has been discussed at North/South Ministerial Council plenary meetings. It was most recently discussed at the meeting held in Limavady on 14 December 2009. At that meeting, the Council noted that the establishment of a forum is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Assembly under paragraph 21 of annex A to the St Andrews Agreement. It also noted the Speaker of the Assembly's proposal to hold a North/South parliamentary conference.

Two working groups, one in the Oireachtas and one in the Assembly, have been established to develop proposals for a North/South parliamentary forum. The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and the Assembly Commission held a joint meeting on 18 November to discuss issues of mutual interest. During discussions, our Speaker, Mr William Hay, proposed that a North/South parliamentary

conference be arranged. That proposal was welcomed by the Ceann Comhairle, and it was agreed to progress the matter through two working groups established by both institutions. I understand that a meeting to discuss arrangements for a North/South parliamentary conference, involving officials from the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly, was scheduled for last week.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister provide more precise information on when the North/South parliamentary forum will be established? I welcome the progress that he has outlined. However, since the inter-parliamentary forum will be such an important body for building trust among our politicians across Ireland and improving understanding on the island, will OFMDFM soon be able to tell us that it is going ahead with it?

The deputy First Minister: As I outlined in my answer, whether it goes ahead is a matter for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and the Assembly Commission. As many people know, we went through arduous negotiations in the Hillsborough discussions, which lasted variously from 10 days to two weeks. The matter was discussed, and the outcome is apparent in the document that was issued. It is clear that the working group that we have established will have a responsibility to take forward matters in the St Andrews Agreement that have yet to be implemented. The responsibility rests with that group, and I hope that its work will be expedited in the interests of ensuring that we see the full implementation of what was agreed at St Andrews some three years ago.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Chean Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire. Will the deputy First Minister confirm that the parliamentary forum and all other outstanding aspects of the St Andrews Agreement, including a strategy to promote and enhance the Irish language, will be addressed and implemented through the structures that were agreed at Hillsborough last Friday?

The deputy First Minister: As was made clear in the agreement that was published on Friday, the First Minister and I will oversee an exercise that examines the St Andrews Agreement and identifies all matters contained in it that have not been faithfully implemented or actioned. We will provide a report to the Executive by the end of February in which we will detail the

level of progress that has been made on each outstanding matter. We will seek approval from the Executive to set up a working group to make recommendations on how progress can be made on matters that have not been actioned. Junior Ministers will be asked to chair that working group and to make an initial report by the end of March. Within four weeks of the working group's initial report, we will agree a programme to effect completion of the working group's agreed conclusions.

OFMDFM: Legislative Programme

8. **Mr Kinahan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail their Department's legislative programme for the current session of the Assembly. (AQO 670/10)

The deputy First Minister: The Member will be aware that, in this session of the Assembly, we introduced a Department of Justice Bill, which passed its Final Stage on 1 December last year. We are developing proposals for a commissioner for older people and a victims and survivors' service, and consultation exercises on the respective proposals took place recently. Legislation will be required to establish both of those, and once we have considered the consultation responses and consulted with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we intend to seek the agreement of the Executive to finalise policy proposals ahead of introducing the relevant Bills in the Assembly later this year. Furthermore, the Member will be aware from the agreement that was published last Friday that we intend to introduce a Bill on parades later this year. Other legislative requirements may arise in the future, and the Executive's agreement to the policy and to the legislation will be sought in accordance with the established procedures.

3.00 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Heart Disease

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to reduce the level of heart disease. (AQO 711/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): In June 2009, I launched a service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being that set standards for the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care of individuals in communities at a greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease. In that context, action is being taken across a wide range of areas to reduce heart disease, including initiatives to promote healthier lifestyles and to reduce smoking, obesity and alcohol consumption.

In recognition of the pivotal role of GP practices, substantial funding is provided to practices for the provision of lifestyle advice on smoking cessation, safe alcohol consumption, healthy diet and physical activity. In addition, GP practices maintain registers of at-risk patients and carry out annual blood pressure assessments and medication reviews for that group. My Department is also developing plans to make Northern Ireland self-sufficient in cardiac surgery and is investing in cardiac rehabilitation.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer.

The Minister may be aware that Cookstown in my constituency has the highest rate of heart disease in Northern Ireland for people under 65 years of age and the third highest for those under 75 years of age. Does the Minister agree that those figures are startling and that the fact that it is a rural constituency is cause for concern? Will he give details of what steps can be taken in rural areas, especially areas that no longer have acute hospital provision?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The first step taken is that I established the Public Health Agency, and its key role is to take forward those vital messages to the general public. The reality is that our hospitals are filled with large numbers of people who, had they made different lifestyle choices in years gone by, would not now be in hospital. Those lifestyle choices relate to smoking, obesity, alcohol, and healthier lifestyles. Secondly, we are dealing with the current situation. For example, we have a requirement for 1,000 cardiac procedures per annum, which is the capacity in the Royal Victoria Hospital. However, demand is higher than that, and we want to satisfy that demand and ensure that patients do not come to harm by waiting overlong for their treatment.

I am not aware of the specific numbers as regards Cookstown. People in Cookstown are

the same as everyone else in Northern Ireland: they are entitled to the support of the Health Service for cardiac and any other procedures, which are provided on the basis of equality and fair treatment for all patients.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's comprehensive response, and I also welcome the additional investment in cardiac rehabilitation. Does the Minister believe that the service framework dealing with cardiac rehabilitation is working, and will he give the percentage of heart attack patients who are able to access cardiac rehabilitation programmes?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With regard to whether the programme is working, the Health Service is, in general, clearly working and that is evidenced by the higher life expectancy of the general population. For example, 25 years ago, cardiac open heart surgery was, typically, provided for patients in their fifties. Today, it is much more likely to be provided for patients in their eighties, due to new medical interventions, the skills of our cardiac teams and the work being undertaken by primary care through GP practices. All that has combined to ensure that we are able to defer major cardiac surgery until much later in life, which demonstrates that the system is working.

The service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being are new standards that the Department has put in place, which allow patients to be shown exactly what type of service they should expect to receive. The Department is rolling out similar frameworks across several other areas of healthcare, and it has already done that for cancer and stroke services. Those frameworks are all about improving the service and expanding quality of life.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the staff who work in cardiology services across Northern Ireland? Does he agree with me that, contrary to what has been proposed by the DUP, health funding should not be reduced? That will ensure that Northern Ireland maintains the highest standards of cardiac care.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Of course I agree with the Member's second point about funding. Members have heard me make that point over and over again, and I assure them that I will not get tired of making it. There is substantial underfunding

in health and social services in Northern Ireland, as we heard during the previous debate on the McElhill/McGovern tragedy.

We have very highly talented and trained professional cardiac teams in Northern Ireland, which are headed by our cardiac surgeons. Each of those surgeons requires a specialist team, including cardiology anaesthetists and specialist nursing and theatre staff, who must be trained and be able to maintain their skills. It is very much a team game, and it is appropriate that we occasionally pay tribute to them, because they save lives daily.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his very detailed response to the original question. Will the Minister provide the cost of sending patients to places such as England and the Republic for heart treatment?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland has the capacity to conduct approximately 1,000 cardiac operations each year, and approximately 1,250 operations are required. Two years ago, I was presented with the choice of allowing patients to remain on waiting lists until those operations became available or sending them elsewhere. Our cardiac surgeons are very successful in determining risk and ensuring that those who are most at risk come first, but some patients were coming to harm while waiting for operations. Therefore, I invested extra money in procedures to ensure that those patients received timely interventions.

As I have said, those interventions are not all available in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Department offered patients a choice among London, Dublin and Glasgow. The procedure in London is comparable to the cost of a procedure in the Royal, but it is more expensive in Dublin. There are differences in travel and accommodation costs. I am considering that matter, because the cost of travel and accommodation brings the cost of having those interventions carried out in Guy's Hospital to almost the same total as the Dublin clinics.

However, one must give patients a choice, and patients very often prefer Dublin because it is a land rather than a sea trip. The other reality is that many of those who require open heart surgery today are much older and perhaps frailer than they would have been 25 years ago. Indeed, many of those patients are very often well into their 70s or 80s. All those factors

must be taken into account to ensure that our patients do not come to harm.

DHSSPS: Budget 2010-11/ Efficiency Savings

2. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on his Department's proposed revised budget for 2010-11. (AQO 712/10)

5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can provide an assurance that the additional savings to be found, as announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, will not impact on front line services. (AQO 715/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 5 together.

The position that I face in the next financial year is dire. Not only am I faced with delivering £700 million of existing efficiencies and a 9% increase in demand, but I am facing a proposed budget reduction.

If implemented, the reduction would take my settlement to a meagre 0.3% above general inflation: in effect, it would be a stand-still budget. My position is even worse than that. Given the increase in GP referrals, the rapid ageing of the population and the increase in the birth rate, I will have to find another £100 million, or perhaps more, in order to simply stand still. The Executive are well aware of those pressures but chose to ignore them when making the proposal for a reduction. I cannot guarantee that the additional cuts will not hit the front line.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for that response. The facts and figures that he has provided are not good news at all. The Minister will be aware that the revised Budget Bill will be introduced to the House next week. Does he agree that any party that votes to further cut the health budget by £133 million will be treated with contempt by the public? Does he also agree that if one does not want cuts to the Health Service, one should not vote DUP? *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is possible that there will be a lot of contempt floating around before all of us are much older. I have outlined the situation in

relation to the Health Service, and I make no apology for doing so again. We need to find £700 million to take out of the health budget over three years. That is an enormous task, and it is causing huge pressures in all the trusts. All Members need to bear that in mind when considering the difficulties in the trusts in their areas.

It is also estimated that, by the end of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, we will be £600 million short of the cost of providing a service comparable to that provided in the UK. As a unionist, I make no apology for saying that I believe that all parts of the UK should get equal treatment. However, that is not possible given the current funding available to the Health Service.

Under the Budget settlement, I got full flexibility over my resource and I was entitled to bid for funding to deal with pandemic flu. However, when I bid for that, I had to accept a very poor settlement indeed, which represents a very serious cut to the Health Service of well over £30 million. As part of the Budget, I also made an agreement to receive the first £20 million of available in-year moneys; I am still waiting for that. All those things add up, but the key thing that people must remember is that demand is up by 9% this year, and was up by 12% last year. Those are huge increases, and they cannot be addressed by a budget increase, in real terms, of less than 1%.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is clear that the Minister faces difficult decisions, as do many of his ministerial colleagues. He made an interesting comment when he said that, as a unionist, he expects everybody in the UK to receive the same treatment. Is that not part of the difficulty? The Minister is looking at Health Service planning on the island of Ireland from a unionist perspective, rather than a health perspective. Does he agree that, as long as he is involved in turning his back on the Health Service in the Twenty-six Counties and does not plan island-wide, we will continue to run into the serious financial difficulties that we are currently faced with?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over and over again, I have said that where we can derive benefits for patients in Northern Ireland, I am not averse to a co-operative venture with the Irish Republic. Mary Harney takes a similar approach.

I remind Mr O'Dowd that cradle-to-grave healthcare is provided universally and free at the point of delivery in the UK. That is not the case in the Irish Republic, where people have to pay. The UK has the only proper health service that actually delivers and is free at the point of delivery. The UK's Health Service is also the cheapest. In France and Germany, there is a hybrid of the system in the Republic of Ireland. In America, where there is a big debate on health, there is a purely private health service, and people pay for that at the point of delivery. There, the health service costs 18% of GDP. In France and Germany, the health service costs 10.5% to 12% of GDP, and in the UK, where the service is universally delivered, it is free and is the best health service in the world, costing just over 8% of GDP. Not only is it better and more efficient but it is cheaper.

3.15 pm

Mr Campbell: I understand the Minister's difficulty, and that of each Minister, in operating under tight financial constraints. Will he join me in commending the many groups that are involved in a voluntary capacity and which do excellent work, particularly those that are involved in the area of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)? Within those tight constraints, will he consider what assistance might be offered to try to help them to alleviate the difficulties that people face?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I subscribe to Mr Campbell's sentiments, and I will look to support anyone who provides health and care in the Province, particularly those who alleviate and address the pain and distress that so many patients feel. However, activity is directly proportionate to the resources that are available to fund it, and as the funding reduces in real terms, which is happening, activity is bound to reduce. Therefore, tough choices are to be made, but I assure the House that I will not make those choices on my own. I will allow every Member to join me in making those tough choices about what happens in hospitals and with staff. As I have done before, I assure every Member that the order of the reductions is severe.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister consider that the system of merit payments for consultants and doctors represents an effective use of public funds? Does he intend to return to that issue when he next undertakes pay negotiations?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I operate the system to the optimum efficiency that I can derive. I take the opportunities to make savings, and I will go forward on that basis. Merit payments, or payments by results, are cost-effective in many areas. I can write to the Member to discuss the basis of British Medical Association (BMA) contracts, and I remind him that, in Northern Ireland, consultants in hospitals get paid less than they would get paid if they lived in the Irish Republic or on the mainland and they get paid about a quarter of what they would get paid if they lived in the United States.

Our entire Health Service provides value for money. I do not pretend that it is perfect in every way and that there is no waste, but where I see waste, I will seek to drive it out. As I said to Mr O'Dowd, as a general rule, the Health Service is efficient and we should be proud of it, not simply because of the standard of care but because of the way that staff provide that care with the limited budget that is offered to them.

Dr Farry: I have sympathy for the position in which the Minister finds himself, but does he regret describing his budget settlement as a "good deal" in February 2008? I identify with the Minister's desire for common standards across the UK. Does he agree that it is time for his party and his Executive colleagues to bite the bullet over water charges? It is difficult to argue that the Health Service is underfunded while taking a different approach to funding water to the rest of the UK.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am grateful that Mr Farry's question went into the realms of water. I remind him that I am the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, not the Minister for water. I never described the health budget as a good deal. I said that it was not enough but was as good as it gets. The key UK standard is democracy, and that standard governs us all. How would the appointment of the Member's party leader as Minister for policing and justice reinforce that principle in any way?

Mr Speaker: Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn and question 5 was grouped with question 2.

Hip Arthroscopy Surgery

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the provision of hip arthroscopy surgery. (AQO 716/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Care Board is working with trusts to develop an evidence-based business case for the development of a hip arthroscopy service in Northern Ireland. In the interim, where the procedure is recommended on clinical grounds, the Health and Social Care Board will consider funding the treatment of individual patients through the standard procedures for extra-contractual referral. The alternative treatment is physiotherapy and medical therapy, and that may be offered to patients if it is considered to be clinically appropriate.

Mr McCarthy: I am deeply disappointed at that response, because it is exactly the same as a written response that I got from the Minister almost one year ago. What has the Minister got to say to a 34-year-old constituent of mine and, indeed, others who are desperately seeking that surgery but cannot get it? They cannot even get that service across the water, because they are being denied extra-contractual referrals by the trust. Those people's options are confined to gobbling up medicine and pills.

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

Mr McCarthy: What does the Minister say to those people?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am just wondering what I will say to Mr McCarthy. Hip arthroscopy is a low-demand service with around 30 procedures per annum: that is the figure for 2009-2010. We cannot provide that type of service when it is in such low demand, because it would not be cost-effective given all the other demands on the Health Service. Hip arthroscopy is usually performed through keyhole surgery, and patients can be referred to hospitals on the mainland for the procedure. Physiotherapy and medical therapy, as well as the standard surgical procedures, are also available. Arthroscopy surgery is mainly used in operations on knee and shoulder joints. I regret that folks have to wait longer for that surgery than they perhaps anticipate that they should have to wait, and I

am happy to look at the issue of waiting times and referrals. However, I really believe that the demand for hip arthroscopy in Northern Ireland would need to be higher than it currently is in order for us to put that service in place.

Mr P Ramsey: Good, effective work in hip and knee replacement surgery has been ongoing. Will the Minister outline whether the number of fractures that people sustained in unfortunate incidents and falls during the severe weather this winter has had a detrimental effect on those already on the waiting list for surgery?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am sure that the Member is aware that the Health Service experiences those pressures every winter. They were particularly severe this winter, and we are still not out of that situation. If the clinics at the Ulster Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital, Royal Victoria Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital cannot cope, we will — this has happened on occasions — suspend elective surgery, which is planned visits to hospital for planned surgery. Elective surgery was temporarily interrupted, but I understand that extra sessions were put on at Altnagelvin and other hospitals to deal with the increasing number of patients on the waiting lists. I will keep that under review. It happens every year; it has been slightly more severe this year. However, I think that the Health Service has coped very well given the pressures under which it operates.

Tyrone County Hospital

7. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can confirm that the rehabilitation and palliative care beds at the Tyrone County Hospital, as set out in the new model of care services, will be sufficiently funded in order to ensure high-quality and safe services. (AQO 717/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Funding for individual services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area is a matter for the Western Trust and the Health and Social Care Board to resolve. I understand that the board has asked the trust to submit a business case for the recurrent funding of palliative care beds at Tyrone County Hospital and that work on the business case is under way. Ensuring the safety of patients receiving treatment in any part of the Health Service and the quality of the services that they receive are my top priorities. I

believe that the new model of care services envisaged for the people of the Western Trust area is consistent with those principles.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister will be aware that those beds are part of the model of care services that was set up at the time when he removed acute services from Tyrone County Hospital. I am sure that the Minister will also be aware that the commissioner of services has informed the Western Trust that the board is not in a position to fund those beds. How, therefore, can the Minister be committed to something that the commissioner for services has indicated to the trust that the board is not prepared to fund?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not know where Mr Buchanan got that information from. It is about as consistent as the other information that he frequently offers to me on the Floor of the House, not least his intervention during this morning's debate on the Omagh fire when he pointed the finger firmly and straight at social services workers. Shame on him for that.

The trust has been asked to submit a business case for rehabilitation and palliative care beds. Business cases are submitted to show that a need exists and to demonstrate value for money. That is happening now, and it will subsequently be determined what degree of service will be provided.

Mr Buchanan, for one, majored on efficiencies. My Department is investigating how to provide palliative and rehabilitation care beds in the Tyrone County Hospital and achieve the optimum value for money.

Mr Buchanan: *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Even when shouting from a sedentary position, Mr Buchanan should make his remarks a little more consistent with what he said in the past.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister agree with everyone in the Omagh and Enniskillen areas that the best way to secure safe services in the long term is through the provision of new hospitals? The hospital on the Enniskillen site is going ahead. Will the Minister assure Members that the plans and funding for the new hospital in Omagh, which were to follow on smoothly from those for the Enniskillen hospital, are in place?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: When the Member began his question, I wondered what on earth he was going to say next. The hospital in Enniskillen is on time and on the money, and it will be delivered by the expected date.

In the teeth of opposition from Mr Buchanan and others, I announced plans for a new enhanced local hospital at Omagh. That is still in the planning process, and funding is at least a year away. We all know what is happening to funding at the moment. Perhaps Mr Buchanan will talk to his colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel and come back to the House in due course to tell us how much funding will be made available for the hospital in Omagh — but no one will hold their breath for that to happen.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister share my concern at Mr Buchanan's continually negative remarks on the entire health provision in the south-west of the Province? Will the Minister confirm that the commitment of providers in the south-west to the Health Service is absolute and that the acute services hospital in Enniskillen will be delivered on time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that the hospital will be delivered on time and will provide the full range of services that one would expect of an acute hospital. It will be a major addition to the provision of hospital services in the south-west. Those services will include 24/7 A&E, inpatient medicine and surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, a critical care unit and day procedures. Its comprehensive range of outpatient services will include medicine, surgery, paediatrics, and obstetrics and gynaecology. It truly is the twenty-first century hospital that the south-west so badly needs.

All that is needed now is a decent road from Enniskillen to Omagh. If I could provide that at no expense to the Health Service, I would do so, but I notice that the Minister who is responsible for roads is about to step up to take questions.

Disability Strategy

8. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the disability strategy will be published. (AQO 718/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials are working to

develop and publish a draft disability strategy for full public consultation by the end of March 2010. Recently, significant progress has been made towards achieving that goal; for example, a multi-agency project team has been established to oversee and contribute to the development of the strategy, and pre-consultation events have been held to engage with health and social care professionals, service users, carers and the voluntary and community sector. It is anticipated that the finalised strategy will be published by early autumn.

Ms Anderson: The disability strategy is cross-cutting and cross-departmental in nature. Therefore, is the Health Department working with OFMDFM on the consultation on promoting social inclusion, which the deputy First Minister mentioned today, and on the working group report that was handed over to OFMDFM in December 2009?

3.30 pm

The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member makes an important point about social inclusion. The Health Service provides most of its care for those in the first and last 10 years of their life, by definition the most vulnerable individuals in our society. Any cuts to the health budget will specifically hit those people, so there is no way around an equality impact assessment, except by sleight of hand.

We are looking to develop our strategy with any Department that has a cross-cutting interest. We have developed a number of strategies. The issue is getting the strategy right and getting the plans and the resource in place to back it up. That is what I am looking to do in a disability strategy.

It is a fact that disability increases with age, and it is also a fact that women are more likely to have a disability than men, unless they are in their younger adult years. Disability gets worse with age, so a strategy is a key measure in extending life and ensuring quality of life.

Regional Development

Belfast Rapid Transit System

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress of the rapid transit system. (AQO 725/10)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My Department is undertaking a public consultation exercise on the policy proposals to inform a new rapid transit Bill. The consultation period will run until 19 February 2010. After that, the Department will consider the views expressed by the consultees and produce a consultation report that will contain the finalised policy.

The rapid transit division is preparing an outline business case for the project. The outline business case process will identify the preferred options for rapid transit with regard to the network routes, a procurement strategy, a commercial business model and a fare system. Identifying the preferred options will allow the Department to undertake the necessary public consultation, impact assessments and appraisals on the various options before recommending a final route alignment for each of the three routes.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister give the House assurances that the scheme will be developed in a way that will allow for an upgrade to light rail and an extension to the Belfast commuter belt in the future? Does he accept that Belfast's transport requirements will only grow and grow in the future and that he needs to make future development as easy as possible?

The Minister for Regional Development: I accept that the transport requirements in Belfast will continue to grow, which is why we have sought to bring forward proposals to address that, such as rapid transit. High dependence on the car, even in the Belfast area, is causing a serious problem for our road network. Therefore, proposals such as rapid transit and more quality bus corridors in and around the Belfast area will be vital in the years ahead.

Future-proofing of anything that is done now is essential. That is why I wanted to ensure that the Environment Minister, the Social Development Minister and I were together on the Belfast city centre proposals so that no Department was doing anything that would inhibit the development of a better transport system in and around the city centre and Belfast generally.

The rapid transit system is designed so that it could be upgraded to light rail, if numbers justified such a move. Although the initial proposal is for three pilot routes, the hope and intention is that the system will include further routes. In due course, that may well take

into consideration some of the areas that the Member talked about.

Mr Gallagher: I bear in mind the points that the Minister made about statutory consultation on aspects of the rapid transit system. Is his Department having discussions with the Planning Service on some aspects of the rapid transit system, and will he update us on any meetings that have taken place?

The Minister for Regional Development: The current consultation, which closes on 19 February, is on the legislative proposals, which are, in essence, enabling legislation. The consultation is not about the detail of the projects or the routes; that discussion is being taken forward by the rapid transit group in the Department. That group is in discussions with all stakeholders, and I am sure that that includes planners.

The group is examining each of the three routes that were proposed as pilot schemes and talking to various people on the ground such as business organisations, public transport providers, planners and Belfast City Council. There will be a consultation period when it releases its proposals for those three routes.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Car Parking

3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Regional Development how Roads Service intends to manage the issue of commuter parking in residential areas, especially in Belfast. (AQO 727/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: By way of background, I should explain that the Belfast metropolitan area plan 2015 sets out the transport proposals that my Department aims to have implemented by 2015. The plan has identified some areas of parking restraint where it is my Department and Roads Service's intention to work towards the improved management of parking, including, where appropriate, the introduction of residents' parking schemes.

Members will be aware that Roads Service's initial attempts to introduce the first residents' parking schemes in the inner-city areas of Belfast were met with considerable local opposition, particularly on the cost of a permit. That led to a considerable delay while my officials dealt with those concerns. Despite the fact that we amended the policy on the

introduction of residents' parking schemes to address local residents' concerns, I regret that the most recent consultation in Belfast still failed to gain sufficient support to allow a scheme to be implemented. However, I am aware of the difficulties that residents experience in many areas of Belfast, and I have not closed down any options that are open to me to resolve the issue. I will meet my officials to consider the best approach for moving forward in light of the experience that has been gained to date and in a way that will harness residents' support.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat. Is the Minister open to exploring the introduction of separate schemes in the five identified areas of Belfast, as opposed to operating them together as is currently proposed?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in my initial answer, I am not closing down any option. I was disappointed because the central objection and, in some cases, the only objection was the cost of the permits. I moved to address that problem and removed the cost of permits. However, when we surveyed in all five areas, we found a very low level of response, which indicated some degree of apathy in those areas towards the parking schemes and nowhere near the required level of support. However, I will meet officials tomorrow to discuss how to make progress, and I am happy to discuss any option to get the schemes off the ground.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister accept that the problem exists because our public transport system is simply inadequate? Does he accept that improving the reliability, price and quality of public transport into the city centre would have a direct effect on the problem of on-street parking?

The Minister for Regional Development: I accept that. We have been striving to achieve that, and passenger numbers on the rail and bus networks have grown considerably over the past number of years. The impetus is to continue to invest to ensure that public transport is reliable, comfortable and accessible. All of our substantial investment in public transport has been intended to achieve that outcome.

Of course, that is one aspect of what needs to happen to stop the problem of people taking cars into city-centre areas and parking them there all day. We must reduce the availability

of parking spaces in the city centre. Ultimately, we must adopt a carrot-and-stick approach to get more and more people out of private cars and on to public transport. However, public transport needs to be brought up to scratch; the investment is trying to achieve that.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement that the early trials of residents' parking schemes were a failure, particularly in south Belfast. Will the Minister give a commitment to the House to work with me and colleagues in other constituencies that are badly affected by commuter parking to develop schemes that satisfy the community? Does he accept that many communities would welcome properly managed and properly designed residential parking schemes?

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not accept that the proposed parking schemes have been a failure. The exercise was not met with the support that we wanted. Nonetheless, while teasing out the issues and working with communities in inner-city areas, we addressed a range of issues and examined each area to determine its specific requirements. The residents' parking scheme has been tailored for each area. As the Member will know, each area is different and has different requirements.

I have met many elected representatives from all areas of Belfast to discuss those schemes, and I am happy to continue to do so. I know that there is a demand in other areas, and we are keen to get some schemes under way, if only to display the benefits that can flow from a residents' parking scheme. Where none exists, it is hard to point out the benefits that will accrue to neighbourhoods. The areas that suffered the most acute stress were the five inner-city areas that have been identified; quite rightly, the schemes in those areas are a priority. We have not given up on getting those schemes off the ground, and we will continue to examine all options. I am happy to discuss those issues with any elected representatives in any of those areas.

Ms Lo: When I last spoke to the Minister, I mentioned Stranmillis. Will he confirm that, when he attends his meeting tomorrow, he will consider areas just outside the five identified areas in the first pilot scheme such as the lower Malone Road and Stranmillis?

The Minister for Regional Development: My colleague mentioned the Bogside, which is also being considered as part of the scheme.

The problem of all-day residents' parking was most acute in the inner-city areas closest to the city centre, and that is where the priority was. Nonetheless, the Member is right: a range of other areas has been identified, and some preliminary assessments have been done in those areas, including the lower Malone Road and Stranmillis and, indeed, the Bogside in Derry. All those issues will be up for discussion as we try to move those schemes forward.

Railways

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his priorities in relation to the extension of the rail network. (AQO 728/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: My priority is to maintain, improve and upgrade existing railway lines in the region. There are no plans to extend the rail network at this time. The development of an overall railway infrastructure was considered during the production of the business case that was completed in August 2007 for the New Trains Two programme. That followed the work of an interdepartmental group that was established in 2006 to consider options for future investment in the railway network here.

As a result, it was agreed that we should continue the emphasis on maintaining and improving the existing infrastructure and improving passenger services. The planned investment in public transport by my Department in the North of Ireland over the next 10 years is set out in the investment delivery plan, which is published on the Strategic Investment Board's website. Therefore, my current priority is to extend the track life of the line between Ballymena and Coleraine; introduce 20 new trains with supporting platform infrastructure and stabling facilities over the next few years; and undertake a full relaying of the line between Coleraine and Derry.

Along with essential maintenance, total rail investment over the next three years could be close to £250 million. That demonstrates clearly my commitment to rail investment. Future investments in the railway will be considered in the context of the current regional development strategy and regional transportation strategy

review, the next comprehensive spending review period and ISNI.

Mr Burns: As the Minister knows, my aim is to get the railway line between Lisburn and Antrim reopened to service Belfast International Airport. Has the Minister had any further discussions with the Kilbride Group regarding the development of a station at the International Airport, the feasibility study for which he agreed to contribute to at a meeting last year?

The Minister for Regional Development: I share the Member's view: I would like to see that line reopened, and I would like to see the railway network extended. However, I am dealing with the here and now, and I am securing a substantial investment to ensure that what we have continues to operate properly and is improved, including the number of trains on the network.

As the Member said, I met representatives of the Kilbride Group's community rail group in March 2009. We discussed proposals to have the Antrim to Knockmore railway line reopened in order to provide new commuter services. Given the proximity of Belfast International Airport to the line, the Kilbride Group's representatives argued for a feasibility study to develop a halt or station at the airport. I made it clear that, if they secured local council support for a study, my Department would contribute to the cost. There has been no follow-up from the Kilbride Group since.

Mr Speaker: I encourage Members to stand in their place if they want to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Neeson: While we are on the subject of the development of the rail network, will the Minister update the Assembly on the provision of new trains, particularly those for use on the Larne line?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member will know that we signed off on the procurement of 20 new trains last year. I do not have the exact details to hand, but I recollect that they are to come into service in 2012 or 2013. The Member and other East Antrim Members have raised the issue of trains on the Larne line on many occasions. There is a commitment, when the new trains come into service, to replace the trains on the Larne line. That will be done very shortly after they come into service.

3.45 pm

Mr Savage: The Minister is aware of the high cost of the railway line from Antrim to Lisburn. However, has he other possible routes in mind so that we can have a railway system that measures up to his expectations?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is not necessarily a question of what I have in mind. There has been a strong lobby to extend the rail network, particularly in the north-west. That applies not just to this Administration; there has been a strong cross-border lobby to extend the railway service into Tyrone, Derry, Fermanagh and Donegal. There is an obvious gap in the rail network in Ireland in the north-west.

The Member is right that extending the rail network would be expensive. Some say that it could be done at the drop of a hat or that Europe is willing to invest a huge amount of money, but that does not always prove to be the case. Europe has been very supportive but not to the extent of opening entire new railway networks.

The Department will continue to press the case. I have supported those who have come to me wanting to extend the railway network and have encouraged them to continue to build their case and to lobby for it. Even though the population in the west is more scattered, the importance of sustainable transport will move higher up the agenda as congestion increasingly becomes a problem.

Mr Hamilton: We should never have closed the line to Comber.

Portaferry-Strangford Ferry

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Regional Development if any assessment has been made of the need to provide an improved backup service for the Portaferry to Strangford ferry. (AQO 729/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department's Roads Service reviewed the need for a backup service for the Portaferry to Strangford ferry several years ago. In 2009, Roads Service produced the MV Rachlyn foot-passenger-only vessel. The vessel is now available in its backup role, should the MV Portaferry II and the MV Strangford car and foot passenger service not be operational.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that two breakdowns of the 40-year-old backup vessel, the MV Strangford, over a 24-hour period during the critical Christmas period is unacceptable? Does he also accept that equally problematic during those breakdowns was the perceived lack of information given to passengers? That included the continually malfunctioning electronic signage, which his Department purchased some years ago at more than £200,000, on some of the roads around the Ards Peninsula.

The Minister for Regional Development: I am disappointed and share the Member's frustration that the service was not available over Christmas. MV Portaferry II, the main operating vessel, was in dock for its annual refit from 5 November 2009. Unfortunately, the main backup vessel, the MV Strangford, developed an engine failure that proved difficult to diagnose. Consequently, that disrupted services from 26 to 29 December. The MV Strangford had been operating reliably before that.

I appreciate the difficulties, as people from the peninsula rely heavily on the service. I will raise the operation of the service with Roads Service. Lessons will have to be learned from that breakdown, because no one likes a breakdown in the service. Information is essential to those who use the service. I will, therefore, raise the issue of signage with Roads Service to ensure that we learn lessons.

Mr P J Bradley: Will the Minister confirm that there is a foot-passenger-only vessel anchored somewhere in Strangford Lough that cannot be put into service because the crew has not been trained? Is there a reason for that delay?

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service plans to recruit additional crew. Two mechanical maintenance staff have been appointed, although they have yet to take up the posts pending security clearance. Agency staff are being brought in to assist on deck until permanent crew have been appointed.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his answers. Has he discussed the Portaferry to Strangford ferry with his counterpart in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment with a view to encouraging tourism? Despite a number of breakdowns, the service operates regularly, and it could be a tourist attraction.

The Minister for Regional Development: No; however, I concur with the Member's view. Having crossed on the ferry on a lovely sunny afternoon, I know that it is a beautiful part of the world. The ferry service greatly enhances that, and it could become a tourism feature. I will mention it to the Minister at the next opportunity.

Mr Speaker: Mr Campbell is not in his place to ask question 6, and question 7 has been withdrawn.

A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue

8. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue road scheme. (AQO 732/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: The A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway is being constructed as part of package 2 of the Roads Service design, build, finance and operate (DBFO) programme. Amey Lagan Roads Limited is the project company, and Lagan Ferrovial is the construction contractor. I can confirm that work is progressing satisfactorily: for example, the bridge providing access from Derrybeg Lane to Newry's new railway station has been open to traffic for several months.

Lagan Ferrovial also made a particular effort to make the Cloghogue junction at the southern end of the scheme available to traffic at the beginning of December to assist with Christmas travel. At the northern end of the scheme, traffic has been moved onto the new northbound dual carriageway between Beech Hill and the new Sheepbridge junction to facilitate the completion of the southbound carriageway at that location.

Lagan Ferrovial recently indicated that construction works on this strategic road improvement scheme were ahead of schedule. Therefore, subject to that momentum being maintained, there is an expectation that the new road may be open to traffic ahead of the programme completion date of December 2010.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I hope that he keeps Armagh in mind if he intends to introduce a new railway network. If there is an opportunity for sections of the new road to be completed on time, will they be opened ahead of the completed road scheme?

The Minister for Regional Development: Lagan Ferrovial indicates that it does not plan to open

the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway in sections. It points out that substantial completion of the construction works under the DBFO contract requires road safety audits, snagging works and other commissioning activities to be carried out that will require access to the new dual carriageway. It also advised that, as construction works progress, it will be necessary to transfer traffic onto sections of the new dual carriageway from time to time. Those arrangements will involve temporary traffic measures.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the completion of the new A1, welcome as it will be, will have only minimal impact on the traffic chaos in Newry, especially the tailbacks on the Camlough, Belfast and Warrenpoint Roads? Will he outline how he intends to address that problem in the interim as we await the progress of the southern relief road for Newry?

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not agree with the Member. He knows the area as well as I do, and, when the strategic traffic — the Belfast to Dublin traffic — is separated from traffic going into Newry on the Belfast Road, that will have a substantial impact on the Camlough Road when the new junction is available. It will also have an impact on the backup of traffic there.

The Member mentioned the Warrenpoint Road, and the southern relief road is a project that we are pressing forward with. Interim measures have been taken, such as signalling and park-and-ride facilities, to encourage more people to use public transport. However, Newry's problems are experienced in every urban area across the island and beyond. A substantial increase in the use of private cars has created difficulties for road systems that were not built to cope with such a volume.

I assure the Member that, when finished, the road will have a significant impact. He said "welcome as it will be", and I am sure that he will be out welcoming it when it does open. I am sure that he will also welcome the substantial investment that we have made in Newry railway station, which will encourage more of the travelling public to use public transport.

Mr Speaker: Mr Lunn is not in his place to ask question 9.

Coleraine Harbour

10. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for Coleraine harbour. (AQO 734/10)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Coleraine harbour is a trust port, and my direct responsibility is limited to matters relating to its governance structure. As part of the forthcoming public consultation exercise on new harbours legislation, I intend to consult on my view that, in principle, Coleraine harbour should become a municipal port. Under that proposal, ownership would transfer from Coleraine Harbour Commissioners to Coleraine Borough Council. Such a change in status would be effected by means of a transfer order that would be brought to the Assembly for approval.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that there has been a wind of change in the Coleraine Harbour Commissioners, largely because new people with vision have been introduced there. Those people have produced a master plan in a short time. Does the Minister agree that it is right to revisit the proposals, given that Coleraine will need to be developed to handle the traffic that will flow from the Shannon and the Erne when the Ulster canal is reopened?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member referred to "new people with vision"; I will have to take his word that the old people did not have vision. From my early discussions with people in that area, including the Coleraine Harbour Commissioners, I concluded that it would be best to transfer the harbour to Coleraine Borough Council and to make it a municipal port. However, that proposal is out for consultation, and I am open to what that will bring. If things have changed, I am sure that we will be able to adapt accordingly.

A6 Road Scheme

11. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A6 road scheme. (AQO 735/10)

The Minister for Regional Development:

I assume that the Member is referring to the proposed A6 Derry to Dungiven dual carriageway scheme, which will incorporate a dual carriageway bypass of Dungiven. Roads Service has advised that work to finalise a reference design for the scheme is continuing. That will enable the completion of the environmental

statement in preparation for the publication of the draft direction and investment Orders. It is anticipated that those Orders will be published before the end of 2010.

Consultations with statutory bodies on environmental issues are under way. Two site investigation contracts, with a combined value of £1 million, have just been awarded. I can further advise that a public exhibition that was held in Strathfoyle on 19 and 20 January sought the views of local residents and businesses on proposals for the A2 between the Maydown and Caw roundabouts. Those proposals resulted from those that were made for the new A2/A6 junction at Stradreagh.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm how much the A6 Derry to Dungiven dualling scheme will cost?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is estimated that the scheme will cost between £320 million and £390 million.

Town Centres

12. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what co-operation exists between his Department and local councils to ensure that the commercial centres of towns are accessible during periods of freezing weather. (AQO 736/1)

The Minister for Regional Development: This could be a record, a Cheann Comhairle.

I advise the Member that there is no statutory duty on Roads Service or, indeed, on district councils, which are responsible for street cleaning, to salt or to clear snow and ice from footways. A key outcome of the most recent review of the winter services, policies and procedures that Roads Service operates and that the Assembly debated fully and accepted, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available at the busier main routes should continue.

The review also included the treatment of footways. At that time, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing what were largely manual tasks would be impractical. It was proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, the Department should 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 to outline the proposals for partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways and pedestrian areas.

Roads Service followed that up by writing to each council to explain the proposals in detail, and it enclosed a proposed model arrangement. In consultation with NILGA (Northern Ireland Local Government Association), Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement. However, only a small number of councils signed up to that agreement. Therefore, the resources that are 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 proposed partnering arrangements with councils.

Mr G Robinson: Will more salt boxes be provided, particularly in very remote rural areas? During the recent period of extreme weather, a lot of people called at my office to request an extension of that facility.

The Minister for Regional Development:

During the prolonged spell of wintry weather, I had a discussion with Roads Service, and its experience is that periods of extreme weather provide an opportunity to test systems to see how they are working. Salt piles and grit are provided on request. Generally, those requests are made by people who live on difficult stretches of road. Indeed, elected representatives make such requests.

There are some 3,500 salt boxes across the North, and there are criteria for where they are located to ensure that they are adequately spread out and that they are not too close together. It is a matter of having a discussion with the depot manager or the Roads Service manager in one's area to identify the areas where salt boxes are required. It is during the summer that such measures will be taken. It is difficult for Roads Service vehicles to get out in icy weather in order to provide new salt piles. If people could identify the trouble spots from their winter experience and discuss them with local managers, we could see whether those needs could be met during the summer so that salt and grit could be in place for the following winter.

4.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: Our weather patterns have changed dramatically and will, by all accounts, continue to change. Does the Minister agree that instead of fiddling around and trying to get councils to do one thing, someone else to do another and someone else again to do a third, an official should go to a country such as Germany to see how it deals with consistent snowfall, year on year? In that way, a comprehensive policy to deal with the situation could be devised.

The Minister for Regional Development:

The problem is that weather patterns are not consistent. On the one hand, we are told that there is global warming; on the other, we have the coldest winter in 30 years. The fact that we have not experienced such weather for 30 years illustrates that we do not get the weather patterns that are usually experienced in the centre of a large continent. There are always lessons to be learnt, but Ireland is an island and it is affected by different climatic conditions. Ours is a difficult country to plan for because it does not have a consistent weather pattern. All we can do is try to improve the systems we have. We have developed systems that cover the vast majority of the needs of the travelling public. However, that still presents problems for people living in rural areas.

As for district councils, the gritting and salting of footpaths is a largely manual operation: it is not suited to Roads Service, which works mostly from vehicles. There is an opportunity to use the connection between regional government and local government. I discussed that with local government in my own area, and I found that manual staff who could have been available for work such as clearing footpaths had been laid off because they could not work. I am disappointed that the discussion a number of years ago did not bear fruit, but, in the light of this winter's experience, there is an opportunity to revisit it.

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends Question Time. I know that a number of questions were withdrawn, but we were able to answer eight questions. I receive complaints all the time from Back-Benchers that Ministers take time deliberating in their answers. However, we cannot say that today, and so I congratulate the Minister. *[Interruption.]*

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I concur with all the remarks you make, as do many Members from around the Chamber. I hope that the Minister's colleagues will take a lesson from Minister Murphy's achievement in this respect.

Private Members' Business

Schools Estate

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the need for newbuild and ongoing maintenance to ensure provision of a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century; recognises the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a procurement mechanism is in place, which expedites the provision of capital projects, and that adequate funds are provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards. — [Mr D Bradley]

Mr McLaughlin: The Minister for Regional Development is leaving the Chamber, and I am trying to work out how we will be able to cope with his ego from now on.

I have considered the motion carefully. On balance, it is very worthy and it deserves to be supported. I hope that it is passed. All parties should enthusiastically support the call to provide a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century and should support the Minister as she bids for additional resources and capital in the monitoring process. Parties should recognise immediately the economic benefit that accrues to the construction industry from newbuild and ongoing maintenance spend.

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

This matter relates to the Education Department, but when our spending Departments put their minds towards ensuring that there is maximum uptake from local industry and enterprises, that benefits indigenous companies. I look forward to the publication of the Finance Committee's report on the procurement process. Despite various entreaties from all parties in the House, there is work still to be done to open up participation and opportunity for indigenous companies to avail themselves of government contracts.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): Does the Member accept that there is a huge difficulty with procurement, which is why the frameworks collapsed? Indigenous companies are excluded from the procurement process because of the introduction of a process that has created a wider net. The result is that local companies involved in maintenance, minor works and

capital works are being severely penalised and are unable to get the work that will supply local industries and local people doing those jobs.

Mr McLaughlin: I accept the Member's point. The Finance Committee examined that matter. Quite clearly, legal challenges have contested the orthodoxy that bigger is necessarily better. We have seen the anomaly where local indigenous companies carried out 100% of the works but did so under the project management of big multinationals, which had all the in-house facilities to ensure that they won the tendering process. There is scope, which is the point that I made. I value the comments that the Member made in that respect.

The final section of the motion states that adequate funds should be provided:

"to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards."

That is a very worthy statement. The proposer would have done justice to his commendable motion had he indicated how much he was talking about. That is a very high standard, and people would want to see —

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I would certainly have indicated how much money is needed had the Minister provided me, as a member of the Education Committee, with that figure. Had the Member been here for the debate this morning, he would have heard that the Minister has not provided the Committee with that information. Perhaps, when she brings forth the information, I will be in a better position to provide a figure.

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

Mr McLaughlin: I welcome the point that was made. I was present for the debate this morning: competing diary commitments created the initial difficulty. I paid particular attention to the proposer's arguments, and I make it clear that I support him. My point is that, over and over again, we have heard arguments from the same party that do not specify where exactly the money would come from, what other budgets would be affected, or how the Executive could address the grandiose claims that are made.

The general thrust is that everyone would address the stricture in the motion, which states that schools should be maintained to the highest possible standards. We are discussing

only one of the spending Departments. There are a number of them, and they have all been affected. We have heard the arguments being made for an increase in the budgets for social housing and health. However, we have a finite amount of money that has been reduced somewhat as a result of external economic conditions changing, the responses of the British Government to those and the falling property prices, which have rendered the entire programme of the disposal of surplus assets of no benefit at all to those spending Departments in the present circumstances.

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

Mr McLaughlin: Bring forward the motions and arguments to achieve the highest possible standards, but let us be sensible. It is time to get away from that pie-in-the-sky argument.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, because the issue must be considered. The Minister will be under no illusion about the issues that I will highlight and draw to her attention yet again. It is important that we do so within the remit of the proposal. In particular, I will make very clear the issues that are vitally important to the people whom I represent and to the constituency of Strangford.

The motion clearly outlines the fact that we must ensure that the physical aspects of our schools maintain the highest standards of the education system that we provide, and it asks for a mechanism to be put in place.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel has made clear his Department's dedication to the construction industry and to playing its part in ensuring that work that is carried out goes to home-grown talent and firms. Indeed, government projects account for over 40% of construction work. That can be maintained and built on, not just for the sake of ensuring that jobs are in place but because that work must be done.

The October 2009 report, 'Construction in the UK Economy: The Benefits of Investment', highlights the multiplier effect of construction on the economy.

Tha repoart suggests that fer ivery £1 pit in tae coanstructshin, that thers aa' hael benifut tae tha naetshin o' £2.85 an fer ivery £1 pit in tae roads an infastructur, aa' foar braider benifut o' £4.83. This is sumthin whuch Aa' hae bin saein

fer yeers an it is ther fer aw tae see that tha benifuts er twaufol: joabs in tha shoart term an lang term benifuts tae tha economy.

The report advises that for every £1 spent on construction, the nation derives a wider economic benefit of £2.85. For every £1 spent on roads, infrastructure benefits by £4.83. I have been saying that for years. The benefits are twofold: jobs in the short term and economic dividends in the long term. The Minister of Finance and Personnel also recognises that, and he has consequently ensured continued investment in that realm. He has set up a task force to help to bring about the right results: getting people off unemployment benefits and into jobs that enhance their skills.

Furthermore, the Minister provided budgets for each Department that, if properly managed, will ensure that capital is spent on construction and maintenance. The Minister of Education must fulfil her role in that area. She must take a real look at her Department, how it is organised and how it uses its capital spend.

I cannot talk about newbuilds without mentioning one that is close to my heart, and I declare an interest, Mr Deputy Speaker, as a member of the board of governors of Glastray College. The college is in my constituency and has an £11 million project for a school newbuild. The college is oversubscribed by 57 pupils this year, and children are turned away every year. The feeder schools are full, and enrolment is steady and secure, yet we are still waiting for the project's start date.

Until now, we have spent £3 million on purchasing land for the newbuild, on consultation costs and on architect's fees, but the school still awaits the green light from the Minister. Recently, two meetings about the newbuild have been cancelled. The school has been left in limbo. It does not want to patch up the roofs and boilers in the short term at a cost of thousands of pounds, because it believes that the newbuild will start soon enough; however, no date has been fixed.

I assume that the money is there. The Minister of Education was confident of having it when she gave the go-ahead to meet the initial costs. Why has the contract not been allocated? Why have the jobs not been created? Why are workers not on site?

The Minister must also consider how she allocates her budget and understand the need to prioritise rather than, with respect, allocate money to apparently unnecessary and often gratuitous schemes that reflect her beliefs and affiliations. Those include £20,000 for each of the four boards for youth clubs and community organisations to promote the Irish language. When funding is needed for much more important projects, why has that money been sneaked in the back door?

I ask the Minister to examine that seriously. We need a fit-for-purpose school that provides quality education to many children. With great respect, there can be no pet projects. Members are well aware that it is not my style to attack Ministers. However, I cannot sit here quietly and allow a debate to take place that highlights the plight of our construction industry and how to further the education of our children.

I ask the Minister to allocate her funding to provide institutions that ensure that our children are the best educated in the world and that they have the facilities required to enhance their education at the most basic level. The time for point-scoring allocations has passed. The community that I represent comprises people of all backgrounds who are urging the Minister to do right by their children and to stop her game-playing. Leave that for children in their playgrounds. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. The built environment within which our children study is crucial to their educational experience and their ability to learn. Schools should be inspiring places in which children and teachers feel that they can flourish. Unfortunately, for two reasons, that is not the case in many schools across Northern Ireland. First, we have a largely dysfunctional procurement and planning policy; and secondly, we face a growing financial crisis.

4.15 pm

In November 2006, in the Department of Education's review of public administration policy paper, which was compiled under direct rule, Ministers outlined problems with the Department's procurement policies, namely the lack of integration, co-ordination and consistency between the planning activities of the education authorities; the lack of robust and consistent information on the condition and

suitability of the schools estate; the time taken to complete economic appraisals in the approval process; the duplication of activities; and the differences between sectors in how planning and development matters are resourced and delivered.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

The Member hit on a very important point. The Minister has put a lot of store in area planning and collaboration, but in the recent report that the Member will be aware came to the Committee for Education, it is abundantly clear that area planning is no longer broadly accepted in the school environment. Furthermore, the entitlement framework contains other criteria that the Minister uses to determine whether or not a school will be built. However, she is proposing to take money out of the entitlement framework, even though it is a statutory obligation that she is supposed to meet by 2013. Yet she tells us that establishing the education and skills authority (ESA) is an Executive programme that must be implemented. Obviously, the Minister does not know what policy suits on any given day of the week.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. Indeed, the Minister talks about her interlinking policies, but when one takes several links out of a chain, it is not much good to anybody. As the Member pointed out, the picture is relatively disorganised, particularly with respect to the procurement policy, which cannot possibly deliver the best value for money or the best results for our children, teachers, society or, indeed, the economy.

Can anyone honestly say that, in nearly three years of devolved government, the situation has improved? The ESA and, as the Member said, area-based planning are in turmoil. Capital projects are under review. The Minister is making decisions, such as those pertaining to the Middletown Centre for Autism, there is a completely unacceptable backlog in school maintenance and, to cap it all, we have run out of money.

Mr B McCrea: Although Mr Lunn is not in his place, will the Member take this opportunity to clarify the Ulster Unionist Party's position on the ESA?

Mr McCallister: As we made clear in the debate last week, of course we are not opposed to the principle of streamlining education structures. Indeed, Mr McCrea clarified that point earlier. However, we have consistently opposed the creation of a super-quango, which the Minister seems intent on doing. We have been rock solid in opposing that measure, and, until the Minister comes up with something more in keeping with our views and our policy statements on the issue, we will continue to oppose it. It is disappointing that Mr Lunn is not in his place.

During the 2008 strategic stocktake, the Minister of Education claimed that, in 2010-11, she would need £90 million for capital projects. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has proposed a further £22 million of cuts to the Department of Education's capital budget next year. There is a gaping hole in the Minister's capital budget, which means that, in the foreseeable future, it is very unlikely that any newbuilds will commence. We must ask ourselves whether that is an acceptable situation.

The 'Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-2018' states:

"The Executive is determined that our schools estate will be redeveloped in time to engage children from all backgrounds — so that all are helped to reach their full potential. Our future economic and societal well-being depends on it."

It is clear that financial mismanagement, circumstances and proposals from the Minister of Finance and Personnel have led to a situation in which developing the schools estate is no longer crucial to our future economic and societal well-being.

I appreciate that we are in a period of fiscal crisis. However, the Executive are still in a period of crisis in government. Their lack of collaborative decision-making until now has led us to that point. We cannot allow the idea that the current financial crisis was inevitable and that current options are the only ones that are available to prevail.

Mrs M Bradley: Formerly, the issue of the schools estate was one of progression. However, since the onset of the current economic climate, the progress on newbuilds has been virtually non-existent. Information on the maintenance of older schools is frighteningly scant, to say the least. Education is in a state of general confusion.

Some schools' physical structure is extremely poor. Overall budgets have been slashed to nothing. Some schools are in desperate need of repair. It is worrying when issues such as health and safety are sidelined due to financial constraints.

In the latest round of cuts, education has taken a £73 million hit, which is to be achieved through the reduction of current expenditure and the halting of non-essential capital expenditure. In plain terms, that means that there will be no newbuilds and a vast reduction in current school budgets that are already near breaking point.

The Department for Social Development (DSD), under the stewardship of my colleague and, of course, my new party leader, Margaret Ritchie, has already evaluated the benefit of investing in newbuilds at present. Quite frankly, if material and labour costs have fallen for house building, the same will apply to education newbuilds. That said, the Minister of Finance and Personnel would no doubt have a line to dampen that theory and would endeavour to challenge any Member of the House who dared to ask for more money. He would want us to tell him where he must find the sum involved and which Department's budget should suffer in order to increase the coffers of another. Perhaps he did not receive my party's document, 'New Priorities', which, in fact, tells him where he can find £400 million without inflicting any more stress on Departments.

I do not want to detract from the motion's seriousness. I am sure that there are schools in every Member's constituency that are in need of essential repair or a complete newbuild.

The Minister of Education will be well aware of the problems around services for pupils and the extreme pressure that special-needs delivery is under. I assure the House that the Committee ensures that she is well informed of our concerns in all aspects of education, not least the education budget forecasts for the new financial year. It is with that in mind that I hope that she will respond positively to the motion and petition the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a formal and effective procurement plan and mechanism are implemented in order to, at least, ease the burden on some schools that are in need of essential repair or, as I said, newbuilds, at the earliest possible date.

All Members have such schools in their constituencies. I certainly do in my area, where lots of schools need lots of repairs. A controlled primary school in my area has been waiting for years to be rebuilt. It owns the land beside the school. Plans to rebuild have been with the Department for many years. I want to see them come to fruition.

It is essential that the Minister of Education oversees schools that are fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. Young people deserve every chance and facility that it is possible to give, so that they all reach their optimum potential. Education is the only avenue that is open to many children and young people who are caught in the poverty trap. It is essential that we do everything that is physically possible to make that learning process safe and enjoyable. I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht in iúl don rún.

I support the motion. Of course, the Assembly — an Tionól seo — must work extremely hard to ensure that the Minister of Education has adequate funds with which to upgrade the schools estate and make it fit for the twenty-first century. I agree with that absolutely. Of course, the Assembly must take into account the financial difficulties in her Department and the wider Executive. Like Mitchel McLaughlin, I hope that parties who have spoken strongly this afternoon will support Caitríona Ruane when she makes bids in monitoring rounds, etc, for additional funding that might become available.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: The Member is asking us to support the Minister in her monitoring round bids, but the same Minister surrendered £9 million because her Department could not spend it owing to technical issues. Therefore, how can he expect Members on this side of the House to support a Minister who is not even capable of managing the financial resources that she has?

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

Mr McElduff: Thank you very much, Francie — I mean, Deputy Speaker. As I understand it, the Minister of Education has been following the normal financial rules. As Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I know that there is a much greater culture

of underspend under a DUP Minister in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Therefore, it is a cross-departmental problem.

Mr B McCrea: The Member has asked us all to support the Minister of Education in getting more money to tackle this important issue. Can I rely on his support, and will he speak to his deputy First Minister and other three Ministers, to ensure that they are all batting for education and that those Ministries will also surrender funds to protect our children?

Mr McElduff: Certainly. It would help if Mr McCrea put that proposition in writing to me, and I will give it due consideration.

Mervyn Storey asked a number of specific questions about North Antrim, and fair play to him. In my constituency, I am anxious that Dean Maguire College in Carrickmore overcomes uncertainty over legal issues and precise site selection to gain absolute assurance about its future. I take this opportunity to commend the Minister and her Department for the tremendous work that was achieved in replacing the previous site of Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh, which was the old building at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital. The college has moved into a beautiful newbuild school in Omagh, and I know that the principal, Nigel Frith, and the students are delighted with it. One of the students is on work experience with me this week — young Conall Campbell — and he is very pleased with his new school environment, because he has witnessed both settings: the old building at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital and the new Drumragh Integrated College. That is very good.

Mr McCallister: In the interests of equality across West Tyrone and South Down, would the Member like to add to his list Down High School and Blackwater Integrated College?

Mr McElduff: That is self-evident. The Member has spoken, and he has spoken well. I commend him for taking the opportunity to highlight constituency concerns. I would be very disappointed in him if he did not do that in this setting, so congratulations; well done.

Lisanelly education campus in Omagh represents another major project. I commend the Minister for her personal interest in that visionary project, and I wish her all the best with taking that forward.

We want to hear about how the Minister's Department has responded, and is responding, to the construction industry crisis. I want to know the Department of Education's response to that, because every Department is charged with responding appropriately. Does the procurement policy provide opportunities for local companies that are hard-pressed at this time? Does it provide opportunities for the long-term unemployed and for apprentices from socially deprived areas?

One sector that has not been mentioned during this debate is Irish-medium schools. I feel that there are a disproportionate number of mobile huts on those sites, and I would like to see a systematic programme for taking the Irish-medium sector forward into proper, newly built schools. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis an cheist seo a phlé inniu, mar creidim go daingean go gcaithfidh infheistiú a dhéanamh san eastát oideachais leis an timpealleacht cheart a sholáthar le gur féidir eispéireas oideachasúil ardchaighdeán a thabhairt do dhaoine óga.

4.30 pm

Today's debate focuses on the continued need for newbuilds and ongoing maintenance in the schools estate, primarily to ensure the provision of a schools estate that is fit for the twenty-first century, and calls on Members to recognise the resulting additional economic benefit through the creation of jobs in the construction industry. I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue with Members, because I firmly believe that, as a priority, we must invest in our education estate to provide the right environment for the delivery of a high-quality educational experience for all our young people, with equality at its core.

The context in which the schools estate is managed and delivered is complex. We have a large schools estate, which is managed by a wide range of sectoral interests, and a history of significant underinvestment. I join Trevor Lunn in saying that the ESA should be a priority for the Assembly, and I hope that it will be. I note the zigzagging and shifting of various political parties, and that is to be welcomed. It is good when people change their minds about things that should have happened.

As a result of that history of underachievement, a significant proportion of the schools estate does not meet the current schools building handbook standards. Investment in our schools estate is recognised in the Executive's 10-year investment strategy, which states that £3.5 billion of capital will be made available for investment in our education infrastructure in the period 2008-2018. In recognition of that, the Executive allocated £700 million over the current Budget period to enable over 100 major school projects to be taken forward. Add to that the outcome of the Irish-medium review, which was held since that allocation was made. Barry McElduff's point was well made. Schools in the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector are among the sectors that have prefabs for classrooms. In some cases, the entire school is in prefabs. We need to take that on board.

If someone arrived from Mars and listened to the debate, he or she could be forgiven for thinking that nothing has happened in the schools estate in the past two years.

Mr McCallister: Yes.

The Minister of Education: Some Members do not know what has happened. I will give some examples, because it is easy to be critical. Abbey Christian Brothers' School in Newry has a new school, as has Ashfield Girls' High School, which I visited recently. It has a beautiful new school, and £23.4 million was spent on it. A replacement school was built for Ballymacrickey Primary School in Glenavy; £23.8 million was spent on a replacement school for Bangor Academy; £5.4 million was spent on Brookfield Special Primary School; and £15.2 million was spent on a replacement school for De La Salle College in the west of the city. Drumragh Integrated College has been mentioned, so I will not mention it again. A new replacement school was built for Glendhu Nursery School, and a beautiful school was built for the Holy Cross College in Tyrone. It is ready for the next generation, and it is operating on an all-ability, co-educational basis. Some £7 million was invested in Orangefield Primary School; £5.3 million in Pond Park Primary School; £0.7 million in an extension of the Irish-medium unit at St Catherine's College; £3.5 million in St Colman's College; £1.8 million in St Patrick's Primary School in Saul; £3.6 million in St Peter's Primary School, Cloughreagh; and £4.4 million in Templepatrick. Work was done at Towerview Primary School as well. The list goes on.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: I will not give way; no Member acknowledged the work that is going on. Let us look at some of the projects that are on site. Work is ongoing at Assumption Grammar School, various post-primary facilities, Ballysillan youth club and Banbridge Academy. Some £32.8 million is being spent on Belfast Boys' Model School. Investment has also been made in Belfast Model School for Girls; Lisbellaw Primary School; Lisnagelvin; Our Lady and St Patrick's; St Cecilia's College; St Mary's College; St Joseph's Primary School; St Mary's Primary School — the list goes on and on.

Basil McCrea will be aware that the most recent investment was made in Magherafelt High School. In fact, representatives from that school are here today. Some £11.5 million is being invested in a replacement building for the school. St Patrick's Grammar School in Downpatrick, which is locally known as "the Red High", has received investment of £16.8 million.

Let us look at things in the round, rather than being selective. A total of £427 million is being invested in the schools estate. Since taking up my role as Minister of Education, I have been at pains to ensure that we fully utilise the capital funds that are available to improve the condition of the schools estate. In 2008-09, my Department's capital spend was in excess of £199 million, which represented 99% of the final budget position. In the current year, 2009-2010, the Department is on track to spend its capital budget.

It is important to remind Members that the Department's capital budget does not merely cover the construction of new schools; it also covers investment in transport, youth and early years, minor works in schools and several other capital requirements. Members should note that, if we are serious about dealing with climate change and reducing wastage in the transport system, transfer 2010 is the best option. Rather than the parties on the opposite Benches trying to block progress and pointing the finger, we must have real debates on such issues.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not. There is no doubt that, in a climate of ever-tightening budgets and with all Departments having to find savings, the situation is difficult. I look forward

to the support of the parties opposite and on this side of the House when I seek more money for capital build projects. Some parties act as the opposition in the Executive and claim that they do not have enough money, and their colleagues try to cause difficulties for other Departments.

I am reviewing capital projects because I want to ensure that the investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the entire policy framework, including the statutory duties on equality and targeting on the basis of objective need. In the current economic climate, the review will ensure that the available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for every taxpayer. In light of that, it is important that we validate that the projects in which we invest are viable in the long term. We must ensure that they are targeted on the basis of need and that equality is at their core.

I commissioned a review of current capital works to ensure that they are all consistent with the overall policy framework. That will not be a protracted exercise, but Members will appreciate that major capital investment must be based on robust, defensible and consistent decisions. Such investment must be able to support important areas, such as raising standards for all, closing the gap in achievement by improving access to equality and improving the learning environment.

We must take into account the reviews of special educational needs and Irish medium. The capital review will inform a more strategic approach to capital investment decisions and the management of the schools estates. In common with other Members, I would like to have additional funds to invest in the infrastructure of schools. I look forward to the support of the Committee for Education and my Executive colleagues from all parties in securing those funds. Every Member is concerned about certain schools in his or her constituency. It is important that those schools receive the support that they deserve.

The current estimate for completing the remaining list of projects is more than £600 million, and that does not take into account the additional major projects that are in the pipeline. Lisanelly is a key priority for me and my Department, and people will have noted its inclusion in Gordon Brown's letter. Lisanelly

represents the way forward for Omagh, and I chair a working group that is examining that issue.

The schools estate has a significant maintenance backlog, which is currently estimated to be in the region of £278 million, and getting money for the maintenance of schools is a good way to kick-start the construction industry and support local companies. In the current financial year, I have allocated and spent in the region of £82 million on minor works across the estate. In the same period, the education and library boards allocated £26.5 million to maintenance, including an additional £5 million that I allocated in-year in recognition of the need to address underinvestment in schools.

I am acutely aware of the additional economic benefit of creating jobs in the construction industry and the need to expedite taking capital projects to the market. To support the local construction industry, my Department and I fully committed the capital budget available to me and maximised the investment in the schools estate. If I am given more, I will be happy to spend it and continue that investment.

One of my objectives is to achieve a system of strong, sustainable schools planned on an area basis and to move away from the way in which things were done previously. In the past, there was no proper area-based planning or decision-making process. As a result, some schools are empty only a couple of years after they were built. We are doing things differently now. Sustainable schools are a key element of the policy framework that I am putting in place, at the heart of which is 'Every School a Good School'; the Irish-medium review; the revised curriculum; the entitlement framework; and equality duties and targeting on the basis of need.

I do not want to name people, but it is disappointing to hear some Members criticising the funding of the Irish-medium sector. I thought that we had moved beyond that, but, obviously, we have not. The Irish-medium sector deserves to be treated on the basis of equality, which it will be by my Department and me.

I fully support and am the lead advocate for the need to provide a schools estate that is fit for the twenty-first century, and my Department and I have fully utilised the funding that is available to do that. I also support the need to ensure that a procurement mechanism is put in place to expedite the provision of capital works, and

my Department and I are also doing everything in our power to deliver on that.

Aontaím go huile is go hiomlán gur chóir cistiú leordhóthanach a bheith ar fáil le scoileanna a chotabháil ag na caighdeáin is airde. Thug mé cuairt ar roinnt mhaith scoileanna ar fud an Tuaiscirt agus tuigim rímhaith an gá atá ann le níos mó infheistiú caipitil in eastát na scoileanna. Leanfaidh mé liom ag cur ina luí ar mo chomhghleacaithe sa Choiste Feidhmiúcháin an gá atá ann le níos mó infheistiú caipitil in eastát na scoileanna.

I totally agree that adequate funding must be provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards. I have visited many schools throughout the North and am acutely aware of the need for enhanced capital investment in the schools estate. I will continue to advocate that with my Executive colleagues.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank all Members and parties for supporting the motion and for their contributions to the debate.

Many Members agreed on several points. We agreed that we want investment in our schools estate; we want the best learning environment for our students and young people; and we will all work to ensure that as many capital projects as possible are realised to help the construction industry. However, many Members were concerned about the review of capital spend that the Minister informed the House about last year. I am sure that, like me, Members were disappointed that the Minister did not tell the House about the criteria for that, other than there being a need for equality and objective need. That is a bit strange coming from a Minister whose party has just sold out on equality at Hillsborough, where it colluded with other parties to deny a nationalist the justice Ministry and a seat at the Executive table. Equality from Sinn Féin? What that party used to call discrimination and gerrymandering, it now calls a historic breakthrough.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Does the Member agree that it is not the first time that Sinn Féin has adopted double standards on the issue of equality? The Minister of Education repeatedly tells the House that equality is at the core of everything that she does. However, let me inform the House that the reason why ESA is not coming back is that the Minister cannot deliver equality. She has insulted the controlled sector and the

transferors, which is yet another example of a Minister who wants equality only on her terms rather than on the basis of treating everybody equally and fairly.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not important that Members who contribute to the debate do so accurately? There is no public record of the transferors or any other sector having registered a complaint about the Minister insulting them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. However, I am sure that the point has been made.

Mrs D Kelly: I take the point that was made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

With the exception of Sinn Féin, all the parties are doing sterling work in trying to reach a compromise agreement on the way forward for transferors.

I assure the Chairperson and others that the SDLP will take no lectures on equality from Members to my right.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Of course.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. She may be mistaken, because the agreement on how the new justice Minister will be elected was not made at Hillsborough; it was voted for in the Chamber. I remind Mrs Kelly that the SDLP voted for those new arrangements.

Mrs D Kelly: I am glad that Mr O'Dowd made that point, because I heard him on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' giving the same spin. The SDLP proposed amendments to the Department of Justice Bill, but those amendments were voted down by Sinn Féin, which is engaged in gerrymandering.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members are straying from the subject and should return to the debate.

Mrs D Kelly: I will get back to Members' contributions. Mr Bradley said that there was a £240 million maintenance backlog in the schools estate. When considering the condition of equipment or the structure of our homes, there comes a time when one realises that one is throwing good money after bad and one has to make a sensible decision on the best way to invest.

Mr McCallister made the point — I cannot recall the title of the report that he mentioned — that some units in the Department of Education were working in silos and that there was no co-ordinated and collaborative approach to getting the best with the budget that we have. That is disappointing, and I hope that the Minister will address those concerns.

Another common thread was procurement. I understand that many procurement matters are not the fault of the Minister; legal challenges held up some decisions. We have to be honest and accept that. However, it now falls to the Minister, in consultation with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to find a way out of that maze and see whether we can ensure that contracts that are still outstanding are soon advertised and tendered for in a fair and equitable way. Many young people and families who depend on the construction industry, either for direct labour or through services provided, are suffering. We need to get to grips with that issue.

It was interesting to hear Mr Barry McElduff tell us how pleased the student who is on placement with him this week is with his school. However, I was told that soil would be turned over in December 2008 for building projects in some of the schools in my area of Lurgan; for example, in Tannaghmore Primary School. It never happened. Every time one asks a question of the Minister, the goalposts change. Either the economic appraisal was not right, the money is not there, the business case has to be deferred or, more recently, it is tied into the entitlement framework arrangements. There is a total lack of clarity in the House — we cannot get direct answers from the Minister — and, more importantly, there is a lack of information and clarity being provided to the boards and management committees of all schools.

It is very telling indeed that, two and a half years on, people still do not know what will happen to their local primary school. Schools are not just centres of education; in many rural areas, they are used as community centres. When deciding on a school for their child, people need surety on whether it has a future, as the Minister has still not made a decision on the Bain recommendations.

Members asked where the funding will come from, and challenged the House to support the Minister in making a bid to the Minister of

Finance and Personnel for additional funding. However, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education pointed out that £9 million was surrendered, and some Members did not have the confidence that, if the Minister were to receive additional funding, that money would be able to be spent. The Committee and the Minister must get to grips with what is going on to allow £9 million to be surrendered in such tight fiscal times.

A few eyebrows were raised around the Chamber when some Members, particularly those from the Sinn Féin Benches, criticised parties that had asked for more services but did not say that their party colleagues in the Executive should surrender their moneys. Mr Basil McCrea pointed out that, in the next debate, Sinn Féin will call for additional services, and that hypocrisy speaks for itself.

The debate has highlighted some key issues of critical concern, not least to parents and children, about the school environment and newbuilds. Questions remain unanswered, and I have no doubt that the Committee will take those forward, as it has done in the past, for the Minister to answer. Certainly, no answers were given here this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the need for newbuild and ongoing maintenance to ensure provision of a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century; recognises the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a procurement mechanism is in place, which expedites the provision of capital projects, and that adequate funds are provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards.

Private Members' Business

Perinatal Psychiatric Services

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose 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 the provision of perinatal psychiatric services is lacking; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that mentally ill mothers and their babies are protected through the establishment of recognised structures for the provision of mental health care in pregnancy.

The perinatal mental health period spans from conception to two years after the birth of the child, and it is during that period that women are most likely to be admitted to psychiatric hospital and are at increased risk of experiencing the effects of mental illness. Women with a pre-existing mental illness are more prone to relapse or reoccurrence of the conditions.

There are four main areas where services fall short of expected standards or where provision is lacking: lack of specialist services, including mother-and-baby units; failure to identify risk factors; inadequate treatment of severe disorders; and lack of co-ordination between services. Importantly, nurses and other health professionals remain unclear about their roles and responsibilities in managing perinatal mental health problems. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety took evidence from individuals who have an interest in and who share concerns about the provision or non-provision of those services.

Suicide is now the most common cause of maternal death. The management of post-natal depression requires a multi-disciplinary approach, and that is supported by the recently published National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines on antenatal and post-natal care for women, which set out a number of key priority areas for improved service frameworks and pathways. Key roles are included for midwives, psychiatrists, health visitors, obstetricians, gynaecologists and GPs. Clear pathways that all professionals

recognise are needed so that any woman who presents in danger is looked after to the highest standards and given appropriate interventions where necessary.

Although suicide is the most common cause of maternal death, it is a hidden problem in society. It is the biggest indirect killer of pregnant women and of women who have given birth recently. For various reasons, such as protecting the surviving child, the issue is a somewhat taboo subject. By tabling the motion, we aim to draw the House's attention to the issue and to call on the Minister to ensure that appropriate support is available for the people who need the service.

The birth of a child is a critical period for any family. It is a period of great joy, but it can also be one of great distress. There is no doubt that after delivery, mothers are at increased risk of psychiatric conditions that affect not only them but the whole family. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was told by the only psychiatrist who specialises in perinatal mental health, Dr Janine Lynch, that long-term mental health and psychological adjustment are influenced by an individual's early environment as well as his or her genes. Therefore, proper intervention would reduce instances of maternal illness, and that would have a beneficial effect on mothers and their children's future psychological health.

The Bamford review identified eight groups of people who have highly specialised mental health needs, and it recommended service developments for each of those groups. One of those groups consists of the people who use perinatal services.

In the Executive response to the Bamford review, one of the suggestions was that those specialist services should be addressed as time and resources permit. Perhaps the Minister will tell us today whether his Department has taken forward any of that work and what, if any, progress has been made in protecting vulnerable women and their families.

I wish to make it clear that not all women who need perinatal support are at the severe end of what is a spectrum. The spectrum ranges from mild, benign and self-limiting baby blues through anxiety and depression to a severe illness called puerperal psychosis. At one end of the spectrum, all that is required is simple reassurance; at the other, hospital admission

and specialist treatment are required. In between, there is a mixed bag of diagnoses. Most of the support can be provided in the primary-care setting so long as staff receive adequate training and support from secondary providers.

Some time ago, the Committee heard at first hand how frustrated staff were, to say the least, at the lack of services for women with perinatal mental illness. Surely, if staff on the front line are making those statements, we need to listen and act sooner rather than later. There are well-developed services in Scotland, England and Wales, but, unfortunately, services on the whole of this island are underdeveloped. The services that have been developed in those countries include a number of mother-and-baby units, and I had the good fortune of visiting such a unit in Glasgow. In Scotland, it is enshrined in law that mentally ill women have the right to be admitted with their babies for specialist treatment for a time. When I spoke directly to women in those mother-and-baby units, they said that not having their child with them would have had a further detrimental effect on their mental health and recovery period.

As I said, nowhere on this island can a woman be admitted with her baby for psychiatric treatment. Given the tight budget restraints, I suggest to the Minister that he explore the mechanisms of the North/South Ministerial Council as a way of developing services in the most efficient manner.

Services here in the North lag well behind in the provision of perinatal psychiatry. We have no recognised structure for the provision of mental health care during pregnancy, and although there is good practice among individuals, services are patchy and inconsistent. There is no regional development strategy. I am aware that the Minister is due to produce a maternity services strategy shortly, and, hopefully, it will have some reference to perinatal services. Perhaps the Minister will advise us on whether that is the case in his contribution to the debate.

I noted in the research pack that there is an identified care pathway in the Western Trust, and I commend that. However, I can only assume that there are no identified care pathways in any of the other trusts, given that there was no mention of them.

In conclusion, we need a strategy for that specialist service to protect those women

and their families when they need it most. We should not allow perinatal depression to be a hidden problem any longer. We need to identify the gaps and implement strategies and supports for those who are providing services on the front line. I urge Members to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Easton: I support the motion as it highlights the need for action on an important subject. The Bamford review, which was published in 2005, highlighted some serious irregularities in mental health services as a whole. Unfortunately, the Bamford review has yet to be fully implemented. The report highlighted the importance of care for mothers and described childbirth as a time when mothers are vulnerable to becoming severely mentally ill. Time is of the essence in implementing those changes, and the Committee is always there to help the Minister to achieve what is best for the people of the Province. Having a baby is usually associated with much joy and happiness, but, unfortunately, that is not the case for many new mothers.

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

Psychiatric disorders contribute to 12% of maternal deaths, with suicide being the leading cause; about 10% of all recently delivered mothers have a major depressive illness. Those are depressing statistics, but they highlight the importance of the issue. We need to do everything in our power to ensure that mothers and mothers-to-be receive the necessary help, care and support from the Health Service.

We hear much about post-natal depression, but many members of the public are unfamiliar with the term “perinatal depression”. It refers to the period in and around childbirth — a crucial moment between mother and baby. It is important that mothers-to-be are looked after in the period leading up to, and after, childbirth. As with many areas of the Health Service, research has shown that there is a need for a multidisciplinary team approach to the care of a mother should she show signs of depression or any other sort of psychiatric behaviour. According to the charity Mind, health professionals are unprepared for providing the necessary psychological help and support to mothers, and that is very worrying.

5.00 pm

I am concerned that there is no mother-and-baby unit in Northern Ireland, and I wonder why

that is. Furthermore, it is a concern that, with so much pressure on hospitals, mothers who are about to give birth are generally rushed in and out of hospital, usually on the same day. A baby may be delivered safely, and mother and baby may be physically well, but the mother's state of mind, and how she is coping after the birth, must be looked at. Having a baby is a life-changing experience, with major physical and psychological consequences for which a mother-to-be may not be prepared. With the focus usually on the baby, a mother can sometimes feel ignored or can put on a brave face. We must ensure that mothers are OK, and that they get the support and care that they need.

Mothers with psychiatric problems should not be subject to long waiting lists for treatment, because the early days of a child's life are very important for the mother and the baby. I join my colleagues from the Health Committee who proposed the motion in their call on the Minister of Health to ensure that mentally ill mothers and their babies are protected through established structures that ensure their care and safety. Mothers, and the care of children, are vital to the future of our society. I support the motion.

Mr McDevitt: The SDLP supports the motion. Across the continent, suicide remains the biggest indirect killer of pregnant women and those who have just given birth. That there is no provision for perinatal mental illness on the island worth talking about is a matter that deserves the attention of the Assembly and, therefore, I commend Mrs O'Neill and her colleagues for tabling the motion. I want to take the opportunity to apologise to Mrs O'Neill for being late and missing the beginning of her speech.

There is a black hole in policy. There is no joined-up thinking with regard to women or the process of bringing a child into the world. Pregnancy is a time in a woman's life that should be filled with profound joy and a great sense of purpose; it is the fulfilment of their very being. However, it can become a living nightmare that often goes undiagnosed, and, when diagnosed, is unable to be treated properly because it is not an option to provide a pregnant woman with medical treatment that might involve antidepressants. That is a further concern. That is particularly worrying given that we know that the problem exists. The Bamford review identified the problem and set out specific recommendations on what to do about

it. However, progress on the implementation of the recommendations remains painfully slow.

The Assembly will note with grave concern that there is not a single perinatal mental health bed in the region or anywhere else on the island. It is surely a failure of society, and of the regional Government, that women continue to find that they are unable to seek answers to what is going on in their bodies and in their minds, not just during pregnancy, but afterwards, and in the early years of their child's life.

I am happy to support the motion. It is important that the House send a signal that the care of pregnant women is something that is as precious to us as the life that lies within them.

Mr Gardiner: The motion is yet another example of a wish-list motion from Sinn Féin: the party that calls for big new spending on health, yet votes for a Budget that cuts back on the Health Department's spending. If Sinn Féin was serious about providing all the services that it has called for, it would not have voted for a Budget that puts the Health Service £600 million behind the rest of the United Kingdom. We will all watch with interest when the time comes for Sinn Féin to vote for the additional £113 million of cuts to the health budget, as planned by the Finance Minister.

The motion raises an issue that I have raised before. It is wrong for a party to propose motions that involve additional public spending without identifying, even in broad terms, where it would find the money to finance such proposals.

No one objects to an extension of perinatal services. An extension is needed; the Bamford review recommended one, and we would all like to see one. I am sure that the Minister would like to provide an extension, but where is he to find the money to fund one? Where is he to find the money in a climate where the DUP Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, is proposing to cut another £113 million from the health budget? That is the heart of the matter.

The time has come for a more reasonable attitude to the motions that are brought before the Assembly. The motion is just another cheap headline for Sinn Féin, which is the party that voted for health cuts. That is the terrible reality. To call for more services and budget cuts at the same time is complete humbug.

Mr McCarthy: I am a wee bit taken aback by Mr Gardiner's comments. However, people are entitled to their opinions.

I welcome the motion and support it on behalf of the United Community. In doing so, I fully acknowledge the excellent work that is carried out throughout Northern Ireland by our Health Service; long may it continue.

I totally agree with the sentiment of the motion. Regardless of what Mr Gardiner said, there is obviously a need for some provision along the lines stated in the motion. I hope that the Minister, who is in the Chamber, can offer such services to all who are in need of them as soon as possible.

Mr Buchanan: I add my support to this timely motion. Like Mr McCarthy, I am taken aback by the lack of compassion from Sam Gardiner on such an important issue. It is important that the Assembly recognises that there is a gap in perinatal psychiatric services provided by the Health Service in Northern Ireland, because only then will steps be taken to improve those services.

Although the arrival of a newborn child is always a joy and delight for any parent, it must be recognised that there are those who suffer from mental health problems during pregnancy and up to two years after the birth of the child. Depression and anxiety are common symptoms during pregnancy and after childbirth, and it is estimated that one in 10 pregnant women in developed countries suffer significant mental health problems.

Both the NICE guidelines on antenatal and post-natal care and the Centre for Maternal and Child Enquiries (CMACE) report, 'Saving Mothers' Lives', show the importance of early identification of women at risk. The guidelines and the report have also outlined the clear role for public health nurses in identifying risk factors and providing early interventions through the promotion of partnerships with midwives, GPs, Sure Start and mental health colleagues.

At one end of the spectrum, simple reassurance is all that is required, while at the other, hospital admission and specialised treatment are necessary. Therefore, most interventions can be provided within the primary care setting, as long as adequate training is in place and the required support for the secondary services is provided. That will mean that specialist services are

only needed to treat those with more serious depressive disorders.

There are well-developed services in England, Scotland and Wales, including a number of mother-and-baby units. It is disappointing and unacceptable that Northern Ireland lags behind in such provision, with no recognised structure for the provision of mental health care during pregnancy and no specialised facility for the admission of mentally ill women and their babies, despite the Bamford review clearly recommending that perinatal services be provided as a specialism.

The Royal College of Nursing recommends that all women with perinatal psychiatric disorder who require specialist psychiatric care should have access to a consultant and other mental health professionals irrespective of their place of residence. Moreover, it believes that proper protocols should be in place in every maternity service for the management of women who are at risk of a relapse into a serious mental illness after delivery. I remind the Minister that that includes County Tyrone, an area in which no maternity service is available. That is blatant inequality and discrimination. Children from the county have had their identities stripped from them. The House should take cognisance of the fact that there is no provision enabling a child to be born in County Tyrone.

I have outlined views that have been expressed by Health Service professionals. Those people are at the cutting edge. Therefore, I ask the Minister to take cognisance of that fact and, as the motion outlines, take steps to establish recognised structures for the provision of mental health care during and after pregnancy. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I attended an event in my constituency on Thursday that was organised by the Patient and Client Council. It was a very welcome event. During the question and answer session, a young mother spoke about her first pregnancy, during which she was feeling down, and a health professional prescribed sleeping tablets for her. As I listened to her, I could see that that young woman is still anxious, though it has been some time since she had her first child. She told the people at the event that she had not been tired and it was not that she did not want to go to sleep. She had been trying to say that she

needed reassurance and professional medical help, which she did not receive.

I saw the Minister's press release when he launched the mental health and learning disability action plan, and it referred to the Patient and Client Council, and I did think that the event was an example of where the plan was working. However, in advance of today's debate, it struck me that although there was perhaps no simple way to deal with the young woman's problem, the solution was not to prescribe sleeping tablets to her. There is a need for services and structures.

I listened to Mr Gardiner, and I am one of the people in Sinn Féin who brought the motion to the House. However, I did not recognise myself in Mr Gardiner's comments.

Mr Gardiner: I have no problem with the motion. If the finance is available, I am quietly confident that the Minister will want to introduce the service. However, the finances must be made available, and the health budget should not be reduced every time cuts are made. I have no problem with the idea. I will support it, encourage it and encourage the Minister to implement it if the funding is available. The funding is my problem.

5.15 pm

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will quote from the Minister's press release, which is insightful. It is particularly apt, given Mr Gardiner's intervention.

Minister McGimpsey said that:

"I was able to secure additional resources for mental health and learning disability and all of the actions in the Plan can be delivered within our existing resources."

I know that there is a difficulty with budgets, and I understand what Mr Gardiner is saying. The Minister talked about using the resources in the existing budget. However, we still have to find a way to deliver for the woman whom I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. I do not think that it would take all that much more money.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michelle O'Neill, referred to the Western Health and Social Care Trust's action plan, which is to do with professional training. That is a good idea; if that had been in place when the mother

whom I spoke about was offered sleeping tablets, the staff would have been better placed and better skilled to deal with the situation.

I read the minutes of the Health Committee's meeting of 17 April 2008 at which Breedagh Hughes of the Royal College of Midwives, a Dr Janine Lynch and others made a presentation. Neither I nor Mr Gardiner were members of the Committee at that time. Anyone who has doubts about the motion should read those minutes. In my view, the evidence that was presented at that meeting was very convincing about what we need to do. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to be able to speak on this motion. On 17 April 2008, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety took evidence from representatives of the Royal College of Midwives on the matter of perinatal psychiatry care. At that meeting, the Committee was told that suicide is the biggest indirect cause of death among pregnant women. We have heard many Members say the same thing today. Suicide is especially prevalent among women who have just given birth. The Committee was also told that suicide is a hidden killer in pregnancy. Many people have no idea that that is such an issue.

The point of the Health Service, and, indeed, the welfare state, is to provide a support mechanism to the population to ensure that society does all that it can to help those who need help. It is clear that perinatal mental health services is an area in which women need the help that the Health Service can provide. The Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) considered that issue and reported with several recommendations.

The motion calls on the Minister to implement changes in the structures of the provision of mental health care for pregnant women. We will hear from the Minister a bit later about what he is doing, and has done, on the reform of mental health care. However, I say to the proposers of the motion that they also have a role in helping to make that happen. We must, in this House, work to protect the health budget. I say that because there is a silent killer out there, and we are debating it today. If we are to protect the vulnerable and provide support to those who need it, we know that our Health Service needs the resources to deal with those issues.

I agree with the proposers of the motion that resources must go into the development of services for pregnant women. The case for that has been made well and cannot be ignored. However, I also believe that the health budget is overstretched. Healthcare in Northern Ireland is appallingly underfunded. The pressures on the health budget make developing services in the Health Service extremely difficult; indeed, almost impossible.

I do not intend to oppose what is a very pertinent motion. However, I suggest to its proposers that they need to look at the bigger problem that the Minister is facing. Perhaps they should, in fact, table motions that are relevant to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, calling for him to properly resource the health budget.

The Bamford review recommended the implementation of a clear regional strategy and a specialist perinatal mental health service.

I would very much like to see that come to pass. I would like to see all the recommendations of the Bamford review implemented. However, we must recognise that we are still waiting for those elements of the review that have not been implemented to be put into operation. They have not been implemented not because there is a lack of political will; it is because there is a lack of funds.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the Members who tabled the motion for raising this important issue. The mental well-being of every mother throughout her pregnancy and after giving birth is important for the mother, her baby and other family members.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) states that perinatal mental health relates to the time that a woman is pregnant and the first year of a baby's life. It covers a wide range of conditions that can affect women during and after pregnancy. That includes everything from mild anxiety, or baby blues, to severe depression and psychotic conditions. For most mothers, having mild symptoms or feeling low during or after pregnancy does not last very long. However, for some, those symptoms can persist and worsen and can have a significant impact on their daily lives. Some need professional help.

It is estimated that as many as one in 10 women experiences a mental health problem

during pregnancy or in the post-natal period. There are 25,000 births a year in Northern Ireland. That means that 2,500 newly pregnant women may need support during and after pregnancy. Of those, a small number will require access to a psychiatric team. An even smaller number — fewer than 100 a year — will need access to inpatient care.

The element of the Bamford review that dealt with adult mental health services and that was published in 2005 recommended that:

"A regional specialist mental health service should be established for women with mental health problems occurring in the perinatal period. The requirement for inpatient mother and baby facilities should be the subject of a regional needs assessment."

In 2008, my Department endorsed the NICE guidance on antenatal and post-natal mental health. The guidance identified key areas for action, including: promotion, prediction and detection of mental health issues during pregnancy and the post-natal period; prevention of mental disorders; management and use of medication; effective communication; and specialised services for women with severe perinatal illness. It was recognised that the guidelines would have significant funding implications for services and that some recommendations would not be available immediately.

Following the publication of that NICE guidance, my Department asked the four former health and social services boards to develop an action plan to implement it. That plan was submitted last year. It was comprehensive, and it included recommendations for establishing a specialist team in each trust area, as well as a four- to six-bed mother-and-baby unit. It was estimated that implementing the recommendations would cost around £1.2 million a year, plus an estimated £3 million capital cost to build a regional unit.

After careful consideration, my officials and professional advisers concluded that the proposals and actions had merit. However, given that my resources are stretched to the limit, implementing the recommendations is just not affordable at this time. Although I may not have the necessary funding, I am still committed to improving perinatal mental health services in Northern Ireland. I believe that the best way forward is to adopt a regional stepped approach that builds on existing work and that links with other major policy areas, including

family support, psychological and psychiatric interventions and child health promotion.

I emphasise, therefore, that although we do not have specialist perinatal mental health services in Northern Ireland, a range of services is always in place for women who need help. The child health promotion programme, for example, is provided from pregnancy to all women and their families, irrespective of need or where families live. It guarantees a universal provision of contacts with key health professionals for every family.

Through the programme, staff members such as health visitors play a vital role. They can use their contacts with families to assess the health of children and parents, and they can identify other problems, such as those relating to maternal mental health.

Where problems exist, health visitors provide early support to mothers. That often prevents problems from escalating. The majority of women with established mental health problems will be treated in primary care by GPs or by community mental health teams where appropriate.

I have made substantial investment in those areas over the past few years, in line with the Bamford recommendations. That has resulted in a range of initiatives, including guidance for health professionals on risk assessment in adult mental health services, which is aimed at heightening awareness of the need for timely and appropriate referral; and Beating the Blues, a computerised therapy for mild to moderate depression accessible through GPs. That programme will be rolled out to every GP practice this year. It also supports the additional services for treating depression that the majority of our GPs are delivering.

The Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family project is about better communication and liaison between children's services and adult mental health services. There is also the mild to moderate depression scheme, which encourages health professionals to provide non-drug therapies and employ counsellors to help treat people with mild to moderate depression.

I recognise that more needs to be done, and will continue to promote a regional approach to perinatal mental health services as an important issue. In doing so, my key objective is to develop an integrated care pathway — in other words, to create a system whereby all

health professionals, such as GPs, midwives, obstetricians, psychiatrists, and health visitors, recognise their responsibilities from early pregnancy and in the first year after birth, and take the appropriate action.

A particular aspect of that integration is the effective liaison between psychiatric and maternity services, especially for women who are at risk of a severe perinatal mental health condition. Following further discussions with colleagues on the board and the Public Health Agency, my Department has written to those bodies with proposals to take that forward, including the development of an integrated care pathway, which includes the prediction and detection of perinatal mental health problems. It will also ensure appropriate referral and support, to include liaison arrangements between maternity and psychiatric services.

Additional training programmes will build on the work already being developed to raise awareness of the need for early detection, support and timely referral to psychiatric services where appropriate. That needs to be delivered on a regional basis, focusing on nurses, midwives and health visitors in the first instance, because they are in regular contact with pregnant women and their babies.

An audit of the prevalence of perinatal mental health conditions will include particular regard to the needs of women with severe mental health conditions who require inpatient care, and the associated impact on their families. That audit will inform the way forward in the continued development of appropriate, specialist services if resources become available. As I have said, the implementation of a comprehensive perinatal mental health service would require additional resources that I do not have.

Mental health services have suffered from years of neglect and underfunding. That is why I secured an additional £54 million in the comprehensive spending review period for those services, on top of the annual spend of approximately £200 million. However, that is not enough. As I said at the time of the Budget, it is as good as it gets, but it is not enough. As I explained during Question Time today, we have had a number of limiting factors on the health budget, including swine flu and the cuts proposed by the Executive. There is a gap of £600 million, and I am required to find £700 million in efficiencies. Sinn Féin proposed that I find that money in a

motion tabled last year, and there was support from other parties to ensure that the Department of Health had its share of cuts.

The background is that there is rising demand in the Health Service — 9% this year — against a resource increase of less than 1%. It does not take a mathematician to work out where we are going.

Our level of activity is dictated by the level of available resources. Last year, the budget was increased by £12 million. I attempted to explain all that at a Committee meeting a couple of weeks ago.

5.30 pm

There has been interdepartmental sign-up to the Bamford review, and the action plan has finally been received. A fact that is continually overlooked is that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not have sole responsibility for implementing the Bamford review. NICE provides guidance on the specialist area of perinatal mental health, and I have an action plan ready for when I receive the necessary resources to move forward.

In the meantime, we have a comprehensive mental health service. Two new hospitals will open in south Belfast soon: the adolescent unit and the family unit, which will be available to mothers and children. The Bluestone unit at Craigavon Area Hospital, for example, also has the capacity to provide a mother-and-baby unit. I fought successfully to secure investment in mental health, but that investment is now in jeopardy. We are trying to provide a service and to meet an ever-increasing demand on a budget that is being continually constrained.

As I explained to Mrs McGill at Committee, there is enough money in the block grant to provide the requested services. It is a question of whether the Executive and Members of the Assembly are prepared to apportion that block grant in an appropriate manner. Over and over again, I have made the point that health is underfunded and requires more money. If I had the money, I would be delighted to put those services in place.

Similarly, I would be delighted to put in place a new children's hospital, a new maternity hospital at the Royal, and much more besides. Even with the support of Tom Buchanan and some extra money, there is another proposal to increase

services in Omagh. I never thought that I would hear anyone using a debate on an issue such as perinatal psychiatric services to electioneer. However, Tom Buchanan's comments never cease to surprise me.

We are where we are, with a good service that could be improved by adding a specialist service. I ask Members to recognise that the implementation of that specialist service would require extra investment.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It gives me great pleasure to make a winding-up speech on the debate. I thank all Members who took part and supported the motion. I want to give special mention to Research and Library Services for providing an extremely comprehensive research pack. In particular, I thank Dr Janice Thompson, who enabled the Committee to make comparisons with England, Scotland and Wales. It is always useful to make comparisons with our nearest neighbours.

I want to take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to a debate. He will probably want a gold star for finding the time to attend today's debate, but he received a demerit for his non-attendance at last Tuesday's debate on cancer treatment.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have attended every single health debate. Last week, I informed the Speaker's Office that I would not be available on a particular day, and the debate was called for that day. Furthermore, the debate concerned a social security issue, and no Minister was named until the last minute. For such snide remarks to be made in a discussion on an important issue —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, that is not a point of order, but your remarks are now on the record.

Ms S Ramsey: It was not a point of order, but I am glad that the Minister made the point. Between 27 April 2009 and 2 February 2010, the Minister attended 20 of 51 health debates in the Chamber. I welcome him to today's debate, but the lack of ministerial attendance on Tuesdays is an issue.

I also thank the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) for providing the Committee with a

briefing paper in preparation for today's debate. In common with others, the Royal College of Midwives supports the implementation of specialist services for perinatal mental health.

As many Members have said, over the years, research has found that suicide is a leading cause of maternal death. Statistics were cited by most Members who spoke. However, let me read this into the record: 10% to 15% of women suffer post-natal depression. One in six women will experience some sort of mental distress during pregnancy or following childbirth.

The Minister cited recent research. There were over 25,000 deliveries in 2008. The rates of the incidence of perinatal mental health imply that between 2,500 and 4,000 of those new mothers suffered post-natal depression, and around 51 were admitted to hospital due to a relapse into a pre-existing mental health problem.

I did some research before Christmas for a women's community group of which I am a member. On the day that I did that research, the World Health Organization put out a statement to the effect that an impact could be made on the cause of women's illnesses, including death, only for the fact that men are in charge. Coming from the World Health Organization, that is something that we need to take on board. Look at the rates of ovarian and cervical cancer: the World Health Organization says that that is because men are in charge.

The Bamford report told us a number of things, and specifically that childbirth is a time of great vulnerability. Conall McDevitt mentioned that birth moves the focus to the baby. Sometimes the mother is forgotten about, which can give rise to a situation where a woman can become severely mentally ill.

I commend the Minister and his Department for getting the additional money, which is useful. Claire McGill mentioned the Minister's press release in which he said that he had enough money to deal with the problem. It is also useful to point out that the June 2009 review of health visiting and school nursing takes forward another of Bamford's recommendations, and that is to be welcomed. It is a positive way forward, recognising that early intervention on infant mental health should be pursued as a preventative measure.

Michelle O'Neill, opening the debate, said that perinatal mental health covers the period from

conception to 2 years. We must be careful that we do not add more troubles and issues if we deal with the issue solely from the perspective of infant mental health.

Mental illness is also a factor in maternal morbidity. I know of two women in my constituency who have died in recent years as a result of suicide associated with perinatal mental illness. There is a human aspect to this: we lose not only an individual member of the community, but a new mother. Some child is losing his mammy. A family is losing a wife, a partner, a sister or a daughter. That is the human cost.

We need to look at this issue. I take on board the Minister's point that we need to live in the real world. I know that the Minister has hard decisions to take. In her opening remarks, Michelle O'Neill mentioned the North/South Ministerial Council. There are no services for perinatal mental health across the island of Ireland. At Question Time, the Minister said that he had no difficulty in looking to the North/South dimension if there is a need for it. I suggest that he look at it for this issue.

Alex Easton said that the focus is sometimes on the baby rather than the mother, and that is a valid point. Supporting the motion, Conall McDevitt stressed that there is a lack of joined-up thinking. He went on to say that the SDLP supports the motion. I am glad that he said that, because Dolores Kelly, in the previous debate, criticised motions brought before the Assembly.

That brings me to Sam Gardiner. I do not think that the motion is a wish list, Sam. I do not accept that my party, or any other, should not bring issues to the Assembly. We are here as elected activists, so we are entitled to bring issues to the Assembly, to have them thrashed out and debated, and to try to take them forward.

As to the Budget, I saw that your party leader was in earlier to talk to you —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please direct all remarks through the Chair, rather than to Members?

Ms S Ramsey: That is not a problem. People are getting very sensitive.

I do not know whether the Member was a member of the Health Committee at the time, but I proposed that the health budget be equality

proofed, and it was pushed through with all-party support. However, the Member needs to talk to his party leader to discover what his position was when the matter went to the Executive.

I return to the briefing from the RCM, which states that there are significant gaps and that there is a need for regional guidance based on the NICE guidance. I do not think that that will cost much money. It also says that there is a need for multi-professional and inter-professional training. I do not think that that will cost a lot of money. It says that the needs of women should be determined in relation to establishing perinatal mental health services and planning future health strategies. I do not think that that will cost a lot of money. We can send out a clear message that we may not get to the endgame this year or next year, but let us start building the foundations so that at least people can see that we are trying to get there. It is not always about money.

We need to treat patients, and treating them early saves money. It is called Investing for Health, which is a strategy to which all Ministers signed up, with the Health Minister taking the lead. Let us see that as investing for health.

Other Members, mainly from the Ulster Unionist Party, mentioned the budget. Claire McGill made a valid point when she highlighted that the Minister had said in his statement that he had secured additional money, and thought that he had the money in his budget to deal with the issue. We need to get it right. The Minister cannot say that there is not enough money to deal with this issue one minute and then release a press statement that says that there is enough.

The Minister went on to say that he supports the 2008 guidelines. I would be grateful for an update on the action plan for the four boards, including outpatient services in trust areas. I also ask the Minister whether he has made any bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) through the monitoring rounds to take forward the action plan that came from the trusts. We could then see the impact, because that is what the Committee has been calling for. The Committee has been asking the Minister to tell it what impact the recent DFP statement will have and to let the Committee know how it can help. By saying that he will not do something, the Minister is not giving the Committee the human side of the possible

impact, which is what the Committee should be told.

We can talk about efficiency savings and wastage in the Health Service. However, has the Minister had any recent discussions with his officials about senior staff pay, rather than let the negotiations take place in England? If we want devolution, it is about having all the issues relating to health and other services devolved.

I commend the Members who took part in the debate. It is useful that we discussed the issues. I commend the Department and the Minister for taking forward the strategy concerning children who are two years old and over. However, if we want to get this right, we need to ensure that we go in at an early stage and build the foundations on concrete rather than sand. We must remember that this is a human issue. It affects all of us and all our constituencies. The fact that the issue only affects women does not mean that we should ignore it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the provision of perinatal psychiatric services is lacking; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that mentally ill mothers and their babies are protected through the establishment of recognised structures for the provision of mental health care in pregnancy.

Adjourned at 5.43 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, you made a ruling on whether or not the First Minister should lodge in the Assembly Library the legal opinion that he received from Mr Maguire QC. Yesterday afternoon, I indicated to the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General that I might come back to the matter. Standing Orders and the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion: Rulings, Convention and Practice' are silent on the matter. Nonetheless, in light of what the twenty-third edition of Erskine May says, I ask you to consider the matter further. On page 74, under "Ministerial Accountability to Parliament", and on the basis of a House of Commons resolution, Erskine May states:

"ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with relevant statute, and the government's Code of Practice on Access to Government Information".

My point of order is that, clearly, it would be inappropriate to rely on public interest in this matter. Clearly, this was an exceptional situation that encouraged a lot of public comment and interest. Therefore, given those circumstances and the fact that Standing Orders and Speaker's rulings are silent on the matter, I submit it to you, Mr Speaker, that you should rely on Erskine May and require the First Minister to lodge in the Assembly Library the legal opinion that he received, the terms of reference regarding that request for legal opinion and details of the process that Mr Maguire undertook in coming to his opinion.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member has said. I am aware that he raised the matter in the House yesterday. I ask him to let me consider the issue and to respond either to him directly or to the House.

Committee Business

2010-11 Spending Plans

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes in which to propose the motion and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the review of 2010-11 spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments announced on 12 January 2010 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee has tabled the motion for the purpose of providing all Members, as individuals or representatives of Committees, with the opportunity to debate the proposals for the review of 2010-11 departmental spending plans.

The proposals were set out in the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement of 12 January 2010 and the accompanying consultation paper. In his statement, the Minister asked the Committee for Finance and Personnel to produce a co-ordinated report on the revised spending plans on behalf of all departmental scrutiny Committees. This debate will, therefore, help to inform that report. The Committee wants to use the opportunity of its report both to comment on the proposals for managing pressures during the upcoming financial year and to consider a range of strategic issues going forward.

As regards the 2010-11 Budget shortfall, the Committee has previously highlighted its general concern at the range and amount of new emerging pressures on existing Budget

allocations. That concern was raised as far back as October 2008 in the Committee's submission to the Executive's strategic stocktake of the Budget position for 2009-2010 and 2010-11. At that time, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) sought to assure the Committee that any pressures could be managed through the in-year monitoring processes. However, that approach has proved inadequate given the scale of the pressures and the diminishing levels of reduced requirements that are being declared by Departments at monitoring rounds. Therefore, it has been necessary to undertake the ongoing review, which resembles a mini-Budget process for 2010-11.

In fulfilling its role to lead and co-ordinate Assembly scrutiny of the spending plans, the Committee agreed a timetable for gathering evidence and preparing its report within the limited time available. That includes briefings both at departmental level and on strategic finance issues. As regards the proposals that the Minister outlined on 12 January 2010, the Committee has put a range of questions to DFP. Those questions ask about, for example, the methodology that the review used to target areas for additional savings and the evidence base that exists to support the various amounts of additional savings that are being proposed across Departments, including how front line services and delivery of Programme for Government targets have been safeguarded in identifying savings. It is worth noting that, during an evidence session on 13 January 2010, DFP officials explained that the evidence base for the targeted savings arose from bilateral engagement between individual Ministers and the Finance Minister, followed by collective discussion at the Executive.

Other issues that the Committee has raised include the detail behind some of the elements of the overall budgetary pressure of £367 million, such as the full implications for the Executive of having to meet the cost of the equal pay claim and the impact of the additional efficiency savings of £123 million that arose from the Chancellor's 2009 Budget. In particular, the Committee has queried whether that will mean a reduction in the rate of growth rather than savings from existing baselines. The Committee has also queried the criteria that will be used to assess the invest to save proposals from Departments and the detail that exists to explain the technical changes that are set out in the review consultation document.

Those and other issues were raised during the oral evidence session with DFP officials on 13 January 2010 and in a list of detailed queries that were subsequently issued to the Department for written response. The Department's response was received only yesterday. Therefore, the Committee has not yet had the time to consider it in detail. The Minister may wish to take the opportunity of today's debate to respond to some of those issues for the benefit of all Members.

I shall turn briefly to DFP's position on its revised spending proposals. On 20 January, the Committee was briefed on the Department's plans to achieve savings of £4.1 million current expenditure and £2.1 million capital expenditure, which equates to 2.4% and 12.3% respectively. Members heard that the proposals focus on streamlining and improving services in work areas and will not have a detrimental impact on the delivery of the Department's Programme for Government targets. Members received assurances that planned savings through the redeployment of staff will not result simply in costs being moved from one business area to another.

DFP also assured the Committee that the front line services provided by Land and Property Services (LPS) had largely been protected in the process. Nevertheless, the LPS remains a concern to the Committee and one which its members will wish to examine more closely.

As regards the input from other departmental scrutiny Committees, I understand that Departments were to publish on their websites further details and supporting information on their revised 2010-11 budget allocations for individual business areas. In that regard, the Committee sought submissions from the other scrutiny Committees on their respective Departments' positions by last Friday. That deadline allowed just over three weeks for each Committee to receive briefings from its Department and agree a submission. Before preparing its report, the Committee for Finance and Personnel will need to analyse those submissions and take concluding evidence from DFP on the themes that emerge from those submissions and from today's debate. However, not all Committees have been briefed in detail by their Departments, and they have not, therefore, been able to provide a comprehensive response. Some Committees have also reported that their Department did not publish revised

spending proposals on its website or that the proposals did not set out the level of detail requested in the Executive's consultation document. That is not an ideal situation.

The requirement for the mini-Budget process and the difficulties arising from the timetable highlight the need to establish a formal process. I am also mindful that time constraints have prevented the Department from undertaking wider public consultation on the proposals. The Committee published its report on the Executive's draft Budget for 2008-2011 in December 2007. At that time, the Committee called for the future Budget process and timetable to be settled early in 2008 so as to enable Assembly Statutory Committees to schedule the necessary scrutiny into their work programmes and thereby provide Departments with notice in respect of the future briefing requirements of Committees.

Subsequently, in its submission to the review of the Executive Budget process in October 2008, the Committee reiterated its call for the establishment of a future Budget process which would maximise the contribution from elected representatives in the Assembly. In that regard, the Committee anxiously awaits the outcome of DFP's review of the Executive's Budget process, which was due for completion by the end of 2008 and should inform the establishment of an effective process for determining future Budgets once the review of 2010-11 spending plans has been concluded.

The Committee's forthcoming report will look beyond 2010-11 and consider a range of strategic and cross-cutting issues. Those issues may include matters such as the scope for realising proper efficiency gains; asset management and capital realisation; the work and the future role of the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU); alternative revenue streams; the review of the in-year monitoring process; and alternative methods of budgeting, including zero-based and performance-based budgeting to achieve optimum allocation of resources in future years. I believe that consideration of such strategic finance issues is important at this stage, with regard to minimising and managing any further public expenditure pressures in the years ahead. I look forward to hearing Members' contributions in this important debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Paisley Jnr): I thank the Finance Committee Chairperson for

bringing the debate before the House. It is a useful debate to have at this time. Unlike a large majority of Assembly Members, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development received a briefing on the 2010-11 spending review, as it applied to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). However, the Committee received it about one hour prior to the meeting and therefore did not have time to scrutinise it, analyse it properly or drill down into it. As the Finance Committee Chairperson has just said, it was not an ideal situation. Therefore, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development feels that it has been unable to do its job of scrutinising important budgetary and financial control issues in the way in which it is expected to do so. The Assembly has, to a large degree, missed out on being able to analyse properly the current spending position.

10.45 am

The Committee noted that the Executive have decided to set DARD a target of saving £6.3 million on current expenditure and £3.4 million on capital investment. The Committee feels that those are reasonable amounts when set alongside the total requirement of £367 million across all Departments and does not have a beef on that point. However, although the Committee has not had an opportunity to drill down properly into the matter, it is concerned that the Department appears to have targeted the softer options of research and education to cover the majority of its additional pressures, including the sale of departmental land. The Committee is aware that the Department is undertaking a review of its entire estate and is placing on record its current opposition to the Department asset-stripping prime public property to pay for past mistakes.

When we are undertaking financial planning, the most important task is to define the current position of the business and where one intends to take it over the next five years with a properly thought-out strategic approach to financial planning. One must have the ability to see what the business environment might be like a long way into the future, not just over the coming months. One must be able to set a broad direction and make decisions along the way that will make that direction unfold correctly. One must have a degree of certainty, be committed to the proposed course and, above all, ensure that the appropriate resources, financial and otherwise, are available.

In that regard, the Committee believes that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has failed in its task. It has failed to plan ahead and take heed of the warnings that presented themselves to it on numerous occasions over the past three years. It has failed to respond to the environment that it has stumbled into. It has failed the rural community and the wider Northern Ireland community and economy, and it has failed through its overvaluation of the Crossnacreevy site, which left the Department with a negative capital investment budget of £174 million. It is not the only Department that overvalues land, but it has, par excellence, overvalued its land and holdings. Therefore, the Department that my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel has to manage has been put in an unenviable position. The Committee has long held the view that that valuation was totally inaccurate and was not substantiated by the Department. Land and Property Services, quite rightly, provided valuations based on a like-for-like use of the land. Responsibility for the overvaluation lies with DARD. Although the £200 million receipt identified by the Department in its accounts may be covered by slippage in other departmental programmes, the Committee is of the view that that represents a major loss to the Northern Ireland economy.

The Department has also failed due to the accumulation of disallowances arising from non-compliance with EU regulations governing the European Union area-based payment scheme.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: That disallowance amounts to more than £30 million proposed in 2004 and 2006.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, during the credit crunch, Members who represent rural areas and want to see jobs created and investments made quickly and efficiently feel that the Department's handling of axis 3 of the rural development programme has been abysmally inadequate in getting the funding out to the communities and rural areas that need investment and job creation to meet the rising unemployment in those areas?

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: Thank you for that extra time, Mr Speaker. I also thank my colleague Mr McGlone for his timely intervention.

I will come to the point, because I now have an extra minute in which to do so. The disallowance of £30 million in the proposed 2005-06 scheme and an additional £30 million in 2007-08 means another £60 million of pressures on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and those pressures have not been properly accounted for.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has failed to include a budgetary requirement for axis 3 of the Northern Ireland rural development programme. My colleague Mr McGlone made that point, and I agree wholeheartedly with him.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I confirm that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has not received papers or briefings about the Department's revised expenditure plans. The Committee is obviously concerned about that, and I have written to the Department on behalf of the Committee to highlight its concern at the continual late receipt of papers. Such delays undoubtedly restrict the Committee's ability to fulfil its scrutiny function.

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I welcome the fact that the public spending directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel recently outlined to the Committee for Finance and Personnel that it is to review the in-year monitor process. That is something that — *[Interruption.]* If Members wish to be entertained by other people, I am quite content to allow them to do so. My party has called for that review consistently over the past year and a half, not merely because of the moneys involved in in-year monitoring — some £2 billion during the last four years — but because it was clear that structural pressures were making the process progressively less effective.

The process, which was designed to ensure more effective spending of public money by

Departments, left less slack available for redistribution and highlighted the inadequacy of underspends as a proper and efficient means of redistribution between the Departments. In the past, that process has led to Departments undertaking spending sprees in the last few months of a financial year. This was not always properly planned and had more to do with the ability to spend money quickly than with an absolute need for many of the items that were purchased. Added to those factors, the cutbacks in block grant finance, which will become even more apparent after the forthcoming general election, even though they may be dressed up as operational efficiencies, will inevitably mean that money will be much tighter than hitherto. The UUP welcomed the Executive's decision, as part of the 2009-2010 June monitoring round, that there was a need for a more aggressive approach in managing down the level of overcommitment as part of the current and future in-year monitoring processes.

There were a variety of reasons why the old system was well past its sell-by date. It encouraged an unreasonable and unrealistic expectation that spending needs would be met; encouraged bad budgetary planning; meant that Departments did not always put in place robust enough analyses of the issues that impacted on programme spending; led to confused and often contradictory messages over real spending priorities; and, in short, was damaging to the integrity of the entire departmental planning process. The old planned underspend system was also a product of the direct rule period, in which scrutiny was not always what it might have been. It was also highly inappropriate for the scrutiny that was inevitable under devolution.

Given the increasing sophistication of financial management information systems, I hope that more frequent in-year monitoring rounds could be possible, as they would enable a far more robust and flexible response to emerging situations than has been possible hitherto. We might also be able to move to a more sophisticated common priority-based scale across all government programmes in the future. That system would see every government programme operated by being placed on a common weighted scale, with pre-agreed weightings applied for key substantive elements of all programmes and relative weightings applied for politically pre-prioritised factors such as healthcare, child poverty, job creation and

protection and social need, which are intrinsic to all programmes.

Those weightings could be represented as numerical values on a scale or as bands, so that decisions on spending cuts could be taken on a fair and equitable basis. The inevitable precursor to that would clearly be a major review of the Programme for Government, which has become unnecessarily restrictive and is more appropriate to a climate quite different to the one in which we now operate.

Mr O'Loan: I have some sympathy for the Minister in the position in which he finds himself. We are in an atmosphere of financial crisis, and the talk of the public every day, in every debate about services — education, health, roads or whatever — is all about the cuts that we have to endure. No one would think that three years ago there was a financial settlement for the Northern Ireland block for a three-year period that represented an increase, in real terms, in the Northern Ireland Budget. That says a good deal about the inadequate management of our public finances over that period.

The Minister had two predecessors. I respect the current Minister in one regard: he is the first of those Ministers to admit that we have a serious problem and to set out to do something about it. Had his predecessors accepted that there was a real problem, there would have been an opportunity to do something much more significant to address the problem much earlier.

There are real pressures on the Budget for next year. The cost of the deferral of water charges has been quantified at £210 million. I noticed that the Minister, in his statement, told us that other non-cash costs have been removed and that there has been, essentially, a change to the accountancy rules. The cost of deferral was previously quantified at £400 million. Had that been the cost, the crisis that we are talking about would have been even more dramatic.

The equal pay issue is very serious, and I see that it is quantified at a higher figure than it was previously. The back pay element is quantified at £155 million to £170 million. As the settlement covers a six-year period, one would expect that, at a crude calculation, the pay scales would increase by roughly one sixth, so a sum probably in excess of £25 million will also accrue annually as a result of the settlement.

I will briefly mention retired workers, because there is a fundamental justice issue in that the settlement does not provide for workers who left the Civil Service within the six-year period under discussion. Those workers are being treated most unfairly, and I ask the Minister to give further consideration to that.

There are pressures arising from the reduced income from rates because of the new reliefs, which I support, and because of the economic downturn. We know that the efforts of the Central Assets Realisation Team (CART) are now almost reduced to nil and, likewise, departmental capital receipts have been savagely reduced. For example, this is the year that the hit from Crossnacreevy will be felt, and that, in itself, will amount to almost £200 million. The Minister tells us that two other significant projects will not go ahead, and he hopes that that will adequately compensate.

The expectations are that the money provided for the Northern Ireland block in the next — presumably three-year — budgetary round will be significantly less. The Assembly agreed a motion that sought to challenge that and to make a case on the basis of need. I will be interested to hear what the Minister can tell us about what he has done on presenting the case for a needs-based assessment for Northern Ireland funding.

There is no allowance for contingencies, and we have seen that they have been a major issue for us. Even within the 2010-11 year, after the Westminster election, there is the real possibility that there may be in-year cuts.

11.00 am

I am concerned greatly by the fact that the statement does not refer to the upfront costs of new councils. Those costs have been estimated at £118 million. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point, because those costs surely need to be quantified.

The Department tells us that it is proceeding on a targeted basis. However, it provides no evidence on how that targeting is done. Therefore, one can only assume that a Civil Service exercise, which ought to have been democratic, was carried out.

Dr Farry: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate. I understand that external events that are beyond the direct control

of people in Northern Ireland have knocked our Budget off course. That said, however, it is important to acknowledge and to reiterate that dissatisfaction was expressed about the Budget when it was originally set out. The opportunity was not taken to put our financial house in order by fixing the roof while the sun was shining, and perhaps in coming to terms with the changed economic and financial climate, we are now experiencing greater difficulties than would otherwise have been the case.

We are now seeing the reality of the cuts filtering through Departments as they look at their revised plans for the incoming financial year. Indeed, we can cite examples of that. We must also factor in that we will not see the missed opportunities and the things that the Executive and Departments could have done but cannot do now because the resources are not available and because greater priority is being given to protecting what we have. In trying to rebalance and modernise the economy, I fear that we will miss opportunities in, for example, the green economy.

We must appreciate that there are structural problems in our finances and that a lack of investment in infrastructure has been a legacy of the past 30 to 40 years. We will now be inhibited from putting those problems right.

In some senses, the debate on how to handle the immediacy of the crisis can be about, to put it simply, cuts versus administrative savings and the desire of all Ministers to protect front line services and for the Departments' back rooms to take all the hit. In practice, we must be wary of taking that simplistic approach. Lines between what constitutes front line services and what constitutes back room services are blurred, and there is no set definition of either. Is a receptionist in a hospital or a health centre a front line member of staff or a back room administrator? In any case, government cannot be run without administrators, and budgets are not bottomless pits from which more and more savings can be found while the veneer of protecting front line services is retained.

However, we must appreciate that there are much deeper distortions in our public finances. That is at the heart of the debate. First, the costs of trying to manage a deeply divided society are a major drain on public finances. Members will be delighted to hear that I will not labour that point; I have made it many times previously.

To an extent, I am sticking my neck out when I make my second point. Raising revenue is a major taboo in the Executive. This Administration and all the parties that are part of it are well outside the political mainstream elsewhere in Europe and further afield. The entire rebalancing of our books is to be done through cuts, rather than by considering any possible additional forms of revenue. I say that as someone who comes from what I believe is a centre-right perspective in support of the free market and the private sector. I am disappointed that some Members here describe themselves as socialists and social democrats but back an agenda that is entirely based on cuts.

I will say what needs to be said about water charges. The deferment of water charges is not covered by the block grant; rather it is done at an opportunity cost to public services. Yesterday, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that he wanted UK standards for our Health Service and that he wanted to ensure that we were keeping up to speed with investment levels elsewhere. I fully accept that argument, but we are not following suit on revenue raising. Instead, we are trying to have it both ways, and I am not sure how long we can continue down that route.

Declan O'Loan made a point about the vast amount of money that is being lost from the Budget because we are not biting the bullet on that difficult issue. We need to move on from talking about whether there should be water charges and how long we can defer them to actually figuring out how we can introduce water charging on a fair basis that is linked to ability to pay, use of water and affordability. Fairness must be the watchword and the way forward on that issue.

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

Dr Farry: We need to be realistic about public finances, rather than trying to have it both ways and misleading the public.

Mr Hamilton: Up to this point, the debate has been useful. I welcome the tabling of this motion by the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee. We should welcome the opportunity to debate such important issues in the House as often and as frequently as we can because of the importance of public finances to each and every person in Northern Ireland. We can welcome the debate without necessarily

being overly welcoming of the fact that we must do what is included in the Minister's paper. I also welcome the fact that all the parties that have spoken on the issue to date have shown maturity in recognising the difficult position in which not only the Minister of Finance, but the whole Executive and every Member in the House, find themselves.

We all know about the tough times that we are still in the middle of because of the economic downturn. We also know about the negative impact that that has had on asset sales, on which so much of the Budget is contingent, and about the legacy of underinvestment in public services in Northern Ireland that the Executive have started to get to grips with. That underinvestment has created a difficulty in that some people have an expectation that there will be continued, massive investment. However, that cannot be sustained in the current climate.

I think that there will be more opportunity during next week's debate to talk about the original Budget, as we start to examine the Budget Bill, so I do not want to take up much time talking about that now. It is clear from the revised departmental expenditure plans that it is immensely difficult to revise the Budget. The calls for a revision of the Budget were made because of the downturn and the pressures on public finances, and it is clear from the revised departmental expenditure plans that that task would have been particularly hard given the difficult climate and that, effectively, we would only have been moving pain from one place to another.

It is important to recognise why we are facing some £370 million of adjustments. The vast bulk of those are because of the deferral of water charges, the cost of which is in excess of £200 million. Although I understand the points that Dr Farry made about revenue raising, I think that the Assembly and the Executive are correct not to increase the burden that households and, indeed, businesses face at this time when people are under pressure and are feeling the pain of the downturn.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. We are having an important debate on this topic. Does the Member accept that by not addressing any additional forms of revenue raising, Northern Ireland is out of line with virtually every country in western Europe in its approach to the downturn? Noticeably, the Irish Republic's Government have made some difficult choices,

and even the three parties in Westminster accept that there must be some increases in taxation. The debate is, therefore, about the balance between taxation and spending cuts, not about whether there should be one or the other.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Hamilton: I agree that this is an important debate, but the time constraints that are placed on it do not allow us to go into detail to do it the justice that it deserves. However, I will be happy to return to it on a later occasion. I am sure that the Member recognises that the people of Northern Ireland are already facing tax increases that have been levied at a national level. If devolution is to have any value, it must provide local responses to problems that are affecting people locally. I think that the Executive and the Assembly can hold their heads up high about the things that they have done to help people during the downturn by keeping money, if not putting it, in their pockets.

Water charges make up the bulk of the adjustments. In addition, more than £60 million is allocated to the equal pay claim settlement. I am concerned by the continuing calls from some Members for the equal pay settlement to be extended. We all understand that a lot of people feel aggrieved because they received unequal pay for a long period of time. However, we should commend the Minister and his Department for settling the equal pay claim at the level that they did. At one time, there were vastly inflated cost estimates of £300 million or £400 million. This year's cost of £65 million is a teddy bears' picnic in comparison with the cost of opening the floodgates, bringing in an additional slew of people and extending the settlement.

It is important to remember that the decisions in the spending plans have had to be taken as a result of decisions that were taken by the entire Executive. It shows a growing maturity within the Executive that the decisions not to levy water charges and to settle the equal pay claim were made by all parties in the Executive. All parties represented in the Executive agreed to those decisions. It is important to remember that the Minister's paper, which is the focus of the debate, was agreed by all parties in the Executive. The difficulties and adjustments that we face will be dealt with as a result of mature,

sensible and thoughtful decisions made by all parties in the Executive.

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Hamilton: There are tough times ahead. However, with that level of maturity, we can get to grips with the issues much better than we may have done in the past.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Arising from the original negotiations that led to the restoration of the Assembly and the establishment of the Executive, a comprehensive commitment was secured around the financial package. Consequently, a three-year Budget was proposed and mandated by the Assembly. That was possible because of the degree of certainty attached to the capital and resource that were available to the Executive.

The Assembly is only too aware of the dramatic and detrimental effect of the global economic tsunami and the calamitous downturn in property values, which rendered the expectation of the capital receipt of asset disposals, which, at the outset, was set at £1.4 billion. That expectation can only be realised in a more favourable economic climate, and, therefore, has had a significant impact. On top of that, the Treasury has imposed additional cuts disguised as efficiencies. The Assembly and the Executive have had to cope with a triple whammy.

The Minister has responded and would have been severely criticised if he had not. He is entitled to considerable support for his attempts to manage the Executive's Budget. His review of spending was a necessary action, and, in cutting the sail to suit his cloth, every Department has had to carry a share of the load. The detail and impact of the review, and, hopefully, a robust defence of essential front line services, will be brought forward when Departments' plans are scrutinised by their respective Committees.

The main thrust of my contribution is to raise questions around the Budget process and the monitoring rounds. We are now coming to the final year of the current agreed Budget period. Now is the time to start planning and initiating debate on the upcoming Budget process. The Finance Committee has made clear its demand that the Budget process be reviewed, be more transparent, and, more importantly, be more timely. An effective Budget review and planning process, involving all Members and all Assembly parties, could take up to six or nine months.

Therefore, bringing a review forward in short order is not necessarily the best way to go forward or to address the issues.

The Committee has been given a commitment that a proper Budget process, whether annual or based on a comprehensive spending review (CSR) time frame, will be debated, discussed and agreed. The promised review of the Budget process should also be produced in a timely fashion, but, as yet, it has not been produced. I urge the Minister to expedite the completion and delivery of the review as soon as possible to allow the parties to begin to turn their minds towards the upcoming budgetary period.

11.15 am

I will touch on the monitoring round. There has been a natural focus on the impacts of the downturn on the economy and its collateral impacts on the Department's ability to address all its expectations and aspirations. However, there have also been significant successes, including an improved performance in budget management, an ability to manage the perennial failure of underspend that resulted in millions of pounds being returned to the Treasury and a reduction in the dependence on overcommitment that had developed over many years. The Minister has kept the focus on that. I suggest that the monitoring round should reflect those increased capacities and that one of the quarterly reviews should become an examination of the Budget in light of current circumstances.

In the next budgetary period, a process should be brought forward whereby the Assembly can develop a consensual approach to the upcoming financial period, whether that is a one-year budgetary period or a CSR period. The CSR is not a bad process because it allows Departments to be strategic in developing their spending plans. One monitoring round should be devoted to an in-year review of the entire process, because the impact on the monitoring process has been a repeated reduction in the amount of money surrendered.

The whole process needs to be updated. I ask the Minister to consider the points that I have made.

Mr McQuillan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. We are all well aware of the economic and financial climate in Northern Ireland and the difficulties that our Government

have faced. To safeguard our public services and to establish an economic recovery, it is important that we make the best decisions on spending and investments.

The Executive asked each Minister to make efficiency savings, but we must ensure that those savings do not affect front line services, such as our Health Service. We must also ensure that savings do not have a detrimental effect on any section of the community in Northern Ireland.

As a result of the equal pay claim, the Minister must make outstanding payments to Northern Ireland civil servants. That process should be resolved in the near future, with any further reviews to be carried out as soon as possible. The Minister also has to contend with continual financial pressures on spending due to the deferral of water charges and the rating of vacant dwellings, which may lead to more difficult choices now and in the future.

I hope that the spending plans of each Department may mean that we do not have to increase the financial burden on households or place further constraints on the funding of public services. The constraints on each Department have more of a consequential effect on smaller Departments that operate with smaller budgets. With continual monitoring by each Minister, I am confident that the required savings can be realised, and I have every confidence that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, with the support of the Assembly, will ensure that public expenditure is controlled in a manner that gives the citizens of Northern Ireland the best value for each pound that is spent on public services.

Mr Elliott: We are all acutely aware of the financial constraints on the Northern Ireland Executive, but several issues should and could be dealt with in a much better manner.

I was pleased that the Minister of Finance and Personnel responded to a question that I asked recently in the Assembly about the sale of the Crossnacreevy site. I asked whether the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) would be wholly responsible for making up the £200 million shortfall. In response, the Minister said that he would have to consider other mechanisms through which to recoup at least some of that money. I am interested in hearing how he hopes

to resolve that matter and spread the shortfall from that sale across all Departments.

I want to deal with other issues arising from DARD's budget and the efficiency savings that it must find. I am deeply concerned that on top of the £8 million of efficiency savings, DARD must find £18 million of budgetary savings simply because of a poor financial management process.

I declare an interest in the Enniskillen campus of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), which was to receive some financial input to move equine studies from Necarne to the Enniskillen campus to enable CAFRE to pull out of the Necarne facilities, which are owned by Fermanagh District Council. I understood that that arrangement had already been put in place. However, Department of Agriculture officials have said that the arrangement is not formally in place and that the Department may have to stay there for some considerable time because it does not have the money to invest in the Enniskillen campus of CAFRE.

I am concerned about the longer term, because if CAFRE does decide to pull out of Necarne and the facility is not located at the Enniskillen campus, there may be no facilities at all. I wonder whether the Finance Minister has had any discussions with the Minister of Agriculture on that issue, which is very important to equine studies throughout the Province. The number of students who attend that college is very high. It is well respected not only in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and Ireland but throughout Europe. I want to ensure and have confidence that that project and that facility will not fall by the wayside.

I am extremely concerned that £5 million is required to fulfil applications under axis 3 of the rural development programme. The Department of Agriculture has indicated that that money is in a savings account in the Department of Finance and Personnel and that it cannot get its hands on it. I understand that that money should have belonged to the Department of Agriculture but that the Department of Finance has almost closed on it like a shark. Perhaps the Minister can explain that, because the money has already been made available through Europe. The match funding has been taken from farmers though modulation money, but the money that cannot be found is the Department's money. We want an explanation of that.

Some of us have heard recently that DARD is bankrupt. We have moved very quickly to a stage where some of us are starting to believe that that may be possible. I hope that that will not be the position at the beginning of the new financial year or, indeed, at the end of it.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment Committee's views on the Department of the Environment's revised expenditure plans for 2010-11.

The Committee was briefed by departmental officials on the issue at its meeting on 28 January, and I commend the Department on the detail of the information that it provided to the Committee. Members heard that the Department has been required by the Executive to make savings of 11.3% of the Department's 2010-11 baseline budget; that is a significant amount by any standards. Members acknowledged that the Department faces significant financial pressures and welcomed its commitment to reduce consultancy spend and its running costs and to review corporate service functions across the Department. Members supported the Department's intention to focus staff cost savings on not filling vacancies in order to avoid the upfront costs that are involved in rapidly addressing staff numbers.

The Committee also welcomed the Department's decision to realign the Planning Service's operating costs and urged it to expedite the process. Members noted that that involves relocating staff rather than making them redundant. The Committee felt that as planning receipts have been in rapid decline since 2007 — some two and a half years — the process should and could have commenced sooner. In light of the demands of the review of public administration (RPA) process, members accepted the Department's approach of excluding the local government division from cuts. However, they were concerned about the proposed deferral of contracts and grant funding to external non-governmental organisations for the following reasons: it is unlikely that those who are affected by cuts will have the opportunity to relocate staff; the decision, unlike the one to realign the Planning Service, could lead to redundancies and the loss of expertise from the sector or the region; and some of the organisations that are affected by the decision deliver or contribute to statutory environmental

protection obligations. The cutting of their funding may not be the most cost-effective approach in the longer term if it leads to a further deterioration of protected sites and/or EU infringement proceedings.

The Department allayed some of the Committee members' concerns by indicating that it is considering options, such as the phasing of grants over a longer period and the targeting of organisations that have a variety of funding streams available to them, and are, therefore, not solely dependent on the Department's funding. The Committee also welcomed the fact that the Department is liaising closely with the organisations that are affected but asked for a more detailed picture of the organisations that face cuts so that members can assess the real impact of the Department's proposals.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that, in the interests of the environment, it is absolutely necessary that adequate funds are made available to the Environment Agency so that it can prevent unscrupulous landfill operators from breaking the law, which causes grave anxiety to whole neighbourhoods, and stamp out the cowboys who operate outside the law?

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: The point is well made. The Committee raised that issue directly with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and expressed concerns about the levels of fines that are imposed by a Magistrate's Court, which are inadequate to deter those who are involved in criminal activity.

Committee members remain concerned about the ability of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to retain sufficient funds to address illegal dumping. The Committee urges the Department of the Environment to ensure that an adequate number of staff remain to tackle that problem. The Committee stressed the importance of using powers afforded by the Northern Ireland Audit Office to data-match information across Departments and of ensuring that receipts for any breaches for which the Department of the Environment has responsibility are maximised.

We live in uncertain economic times, and tough measures must be taken to ensure that savings are made and value for money is achieved. On

behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the Department of the Environment's proposed measures.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill):

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to point out that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is unable to provide a substantive reply to the debate because the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has not supplied a detailed breakdown of how he intends to implement the proposed additional savings across his Department.

The Committee took evidence from the Minister and his officials and from representatives of various trade unions on 28 January 2010, with the intention of scrutinising proposals for making additional savings. However, Minister McGimpsey publicly took the position that his Department should be exempted from having to make any additional savings.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Member agree that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is behaving recklessly in the management of his requirements under the spending plans that have been put to him, and that, in fact, we are probably facing a period of stealth cuts in front line services because of his failure to provide the House or the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety with the information that we all need in order to protect those services?

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Mr Elliott: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate to say that the Minister has acted recklessly?

Mr Speaker: I hear the Member's point of order, but that is part of the cut and thrust of debate in the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Mr McDevitt for his intervention, and I agree with his comments. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is burying his

head in the sand on this issue. He has to find those savings —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): He is behaving like an ostrich.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It may be an ostrich mentality.

The Minister has often said that the Department should not be subject to the proposed additional savings of £92 million in revenue funding and £21.5 million in capital funding. He has provided a rationale for his position that is based on the rising demands on health and social care services, and he asks why his Department is not receiving more money instead of facing cuts. Any Member who is interested in the Minister's rationale will find the full Hansard report of the Committee's meeting on the Assembly's website. Those who read it will find no surprises as the Minister tends to make the same argument no matter what the topic.

Although the Committee has some sympathy for, and understanding of, the pressures that face the health and social care sector, it has pushed, and will continue to push, the Minister to provide detailed information as soon as possible.

The Committee does not agree with the Minister's strategy that no cuts should be imposed, because given the detailed information that it requires, the Committee is unable to judge the alternative. I also point out that charities, lobby groups and non-governmental organisations involved in the health and social care sector are pushing to see those figures as soon as possible and frequently lobby the Committee on the issue. On behalf of the Committee, I again ask the Minister to publish detailed proposals as soon as possible.

11.30 am

I will make a few comments in my capacity as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on health. We all recognise the importance of the Health Service and of ensuring that it has adequate resources. However, the Minister cannot be exempt from the need to drive efficiencies and find savings across his Department without affecting front line services. That is a Minister's job, and this Minister cannot shirk his responsibilities on that matter. It is also not enough merely to say that his Department should be exempt from finding more efficient ways to move forward, when the

reality is that the budgets of all Departments are affected. I am sure that the Minister would agree that if his Department were to be exempt, his party colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning, would have something to say about that, because his budget would also be cut.

In the House, the Minister is often quick to criticise the Executive. However, I remind him that his party colleague voted in favour of the spending review plans when they were discussed by the Executive in December 2008. I also point out to the Minister that the Executive have not been shy when it comes to important public health issues. The Executive stepped in, and Ministers gave up money from their Departments, to help to tackle the swine flu epidemic.

The Committee has been looking at the whole issue of inefficiencies in the Health Service and has often referred to the over-abundance of managers and administrators. It has ongoing concerns on that matter. We need the Minister to get on with his job instead of constantly trying to bury his head in the sand and avoid making the hard choices that every Minister must make.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): The Department for Social Development's (DSD) revised spending plans were considered at the Committee's meetings of 28 January and 4 February.

The Committee was keen to see and understand the detail of the Department's revisions to its budget and wanted to assure itself that changes would be driven by real improvements and lasting savings in the Department. No Committee member wanted cutbacks to be made purely to those front line services that are provided by the voluntary and community sector. Members also wanted to be sure that reductions across capital and resource expenditure lines would not be made by an arbitrary or fixed amount. After a detailed examination of the methodology, the Committee looks forward to contributing to the debate today and to setting out its concerns, suggestions and, when merited, its approval.

I have to say that the Department provided very little written background detail and limited oral information on its revised spending plans.

Mr F McCann: At the Committee meeting that departmental officials attended, members

strongly raised the issue that possible efficiencies could have been made within the Department, rather than direct cuts to front line services such as housing maintenance, social security office provision and local community funding, which was what the Committee was looking at. The Committee was concerned and asked the Department to return with a breakdown of the cuts that were going to be made.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I certainly concur with the Member's sentiments. Indeed, a ministerial briefing on those matters has been promised for late February or early March.

The Committee agrees that DSD's consultation strategy, although perhaps complying with some aspects of the DFP timeline, will not facilitate adequate Committee involvement in the review of its revised spending plans. Committee members indicated their disappointment and frustration, and the Chairperson has written to Minister Ritchie about that.

The Committee considered a number of issues around the information provided. As regards resource reductions, members were disappointed to note that cuts of approximately 2.6% had apparently been allocated to all resource groups. That means that the urban regeneration and community development group will lose £1.6 million. The House will agree that there is never a good place to make a budget cut, but Committee members indicated particular concerns about the way in which quite small budget reductions for matters such as community development can have a disproportionately large adverse affect on deprived groups and areas. The Committee hopes that further information, when provided, will show that budget reductions are not being secured purely at the expense of the voluntary and community sectors.

The Committee was also unable to secure clarity from the Department on capital budgets. It is understood that decisions on the treatment of slippage of important capital projects, such as the Royal Exchange, are awaited. The Committee views the Royal Exchange as a crucial regeneration project and welcomes the Executive's assurance that it will be funded. However, it is hoped that some flexibility can be shown in the treatment of the slippage. It is hoped that some other support can be transferred in the coming

financial year to other capital projects relating to social housing, for example.

The Committee was also concerned about the absence of detail about the Department's treatment of the ongoing costs of the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement. It is understood that those costs will amount to some £12 million in 2010-11. The Department has not yet explained how that significant additional pressure is to be managed. The Committee hopes that the Department will be more forthcoming in that regard and that consideration will be given to offering flexibility to DFP in managing the problem.

The Committee was disappointed at the absence of information from the Department on its spending plans. During our deliberations, members of the Committee referred to the limited engagement afforded to it in respect of budget matters in general and during monitoring rounds in particular. I hope that, after the debate, the Department will think again about how it can interface with the Social Development Committee in a more useful fashion during its consideration of spending plans.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McEliduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt thar ceann na Choiste Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóillíochta.

The Committee took evidence from departmental officials on the proposed revised budget for 2010-11 at its meeting on Thursday 28 January. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is required to make a cut of 5%, or £5.9 million, in current expenditure, and 25%, or £20 million, in capital investment based on its indicative budgets for 2010-11. The overall cuts to the region's block translate to around 2.4% in current expenditure and 10% in capital investment. Therefore, the Department's budget is being cut significantly — disproportionately so in comparison with the overall block position.

The Committee was disappointed that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has the highest cuts of all Departments except the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Committee is of the view that DCAL is sometimes regarded as a soft target for budgetary cuts because the impact of its business area is not fully understood or recognised. The Committee thinks that investment in DCAL business areas — sport, arts, culture,

libraries and museums — contributes to key areas of economic growth such as the creative industries and cultural tourism. That form of activity has the potential to generate jobs and to attract tourists to the region.

The Committee took evidence from Sport NI on Thursday 4 February 2010. We took evidence from the chief executive, Eamonn McCartan, the director of the sports institute, Shaun Ogle, and the director of participation, Nick Harkness, on how the proposed cuts will affect Sport NI's ability to deliver key projects and programmes on the ground. I was grateful to Sport NI for responding so quickly to the Committee's invitation, because its council had not yet met.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member share my concern that the Minister's delay in making a decision is putting opportunities for elite facilities at serious risk?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: I concur with Mrs Kelly that, along with Places for Sport, elite facilities is one of the programmes that may be badly affected. The Places for Sport programme is very popular in communities, and grass-roots, community-based sports clubs place huge importance on it.

The Committee is concerned that a realisation of the cuts to Sport NI's budget will lessen the opportunities for young people and adults, particularly those from socially deprived areas, to participate in sport and physical activity. Dramatically increasing the number of adults and young people who participate in sport and physical activity is a key target of the Programme for Government.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member share my concern about the fact that £42 million of lottery money that was supposed to come to the Province has been diverted to London? That money is a loss to the Province as well.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Shannon served on the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee previously, and I agree with him that sport here is being really badly hit. There should be a rethink on how sport is, and has been, affected. Jim has mentioned, for example, money being diverted away from grass-roots, community-based projects and towards preparations for the

Olympics. There is real concern in the sports community that the ability of people, particularly those living in socially deprived areas, to pursue sport and physical activity is not being properly respected. That ability to participate is key to improving health and well-being.

The Committee also expressed a number of concerns about the public consultation on, and public access to, the proposed changes to the Department's budget. The Finance Minister announced the proposed savings to the House on 12 January. In that statement, the Minister said that he had asked his Executive colleagues to publish details of the implications for their individual Departments on the departmental websites. However, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure did not publish that information on its website until 25 January: almost two weeks later. Given the importance of the issue, that would seem to be an undue delay.

Furthermore, no information on how members of the public should make their views known to the Department was provided, and no closing date for the consultation period was given either. The Committee understands that the main form of consultation on the revised Budget will be through Assembly Committees. However, that does not preclude the public absolutely. It does not mean that the public should not be provided with transparent information about the process and about how they can make their views known.

We re-emphasise the importance of financial investment in sport and physical activity.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport and physical activity must not be a loser in this process.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I will inform the House of the position of the education budget, which faces an additional resource expenditure pressure of £52 million and capital expenditure pressures of £22 million following the Executive's review of their spending plans. The Minister of Education wrote to the Committee on 14 January to highlight the fact that in addition to the proposed £52 million resource saving, there was a resource pressure of £40 million in the 2010-11 education budget. Therefore, the resource pressures total £92 million, which is a huge amount of money.

Senior departmental officials had previously informed the Committee of a £70 million capital expenditure requirement in 2010-11 and a further proposed capital saving of £22 million, which amounts to a capital pressure of £92 million. It is easy to come to the House and give figures without fully understanding the impact that such pressures will have on the delivery of education in our schools. The Minister sought the Committee's views on how to deliver the savings and address existing pressures.

11.45 am

However, despite the appearance before the Committee of senior departmental officials to discuss the budget on 18 November 2009, 9 December 2009, 20 January 2010 and 27 January 2010, and the attendance of the Minister on 3 February 2010, the Committee is not in a position to give its views on how to address proposed savings and existing resource and capital pressures. I want to explain why that is the case.

The Minister identified five areas for potential reductions. The Committee was not provided with sufficient information on the nature of the spend in each area or, in particular, the impact of potential reductions. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development said, the information was not drilled down. Insufficient information was given to inform the Education Committee and to enable it to give help and advice.

The Minister commissioned a convergence delivery plan to reduce bureaucracy and to streamline delivery in the administration of education, but that has yet to be provided to the Committee. It is a secret document that is within the domain of the Department of Education. The Minister wants to hold it close and does not want to let anybody else see it, because, I suspect, it contains controversial aspects that should be more closely scrutinised. Furthermore, the Minister's review of the education capital programme has not been provided to the Committee. No objective criteria have been given to the Committee to tell it the basis on which decisions can be made about newbuilds in the education estate that have been announced already. No information was provided to the Committee on other measures to deliver savings, which have been posted — as other Members have said — on the Department of Education's website.

I conclude my remarks on the situation in education as an Assembly Member, rather than as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. A serious crisis faces education, not only because we happen to have the current Minister in office, though that is problematic enough. We have a situation in which it has been proposed that schools be built. I welcome the fact that the Finance Minister has made available a huge amount of money to the Department of Education, which has allowed us to spend money on putting newbuilds in place. However, we now face a critical situation, whereby schools that have been promised newbuilds will be subjected to a review, for which neither the House nor the Education Committee has seen the criteria.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

Given her past record, Members cannot trust the Education Minister to come to the House and give the right figures for the reconstitution of education and library boards. She cannot count. I do not think that the Minister is capable of doing her sums on newbuilds for education.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

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

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was briefed by departmental officials on 28 January. I thank the officials for that briefing. It was a frank and open presentation and, for that, members of the Committee are grateful.

Committee members were informed that the Executive have agreed to Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) savings of £4.6 million, which is 2.2%, and £6.6 million, which is 8.2%, capital expenditure, based on the opening 2010-11 budget allocations. That may not seem like much compared to other Departments. However, the Committee noted that more than £200 million, which is 71% of the Department's budget, is contractually committed, which leaves very little room to manoeuvre. It is very worrying that there is such little room to manoeuvre, and that is something about which members expressed concern.

Members were concerned about the level of committed expenditure. Those concerns were echoed by DETI officials, who informed

the Committee that if the level of committed expenditure were significantly higher, DETI would have to cease all activities apart from monitoring existing commitments. Although those pressures are difficult, but not insurmountable, I am worried about where future savings can be made in the Department because there does not seem to be room for manoeuvre. If there is a new Government at Westminster, we anticipate wider and deeper cuts in future years. Those could well impact on DETI, which is very important in respect of stimulating the economy.

The most significant areas of concern to Committee members were the £6 million reduction in the capital expenditure of Invest Northern Ireland, which probably relates to reductions in land acquisition and development; the £1.6 million reduction in the current expenditure of InterTradeIreland; the £1 million reduction in the current expenditure of Tourism Ireland; and the £400,000 reduction in the current expenditure of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Some members were concerned that reductions in land acquisition by Invest Northern Ireland would result in a shortage of land for business investment and would prevent Northern Ireland from taking full advantage of an economic upturn. In a situation in which we are coming out of recession, it is deeply worrying that we will not have the availability of land to take full advantage of any upturn.

DETI officials informed the Committee that, owing to the economic downturn, current stocks of development land have not been reduced to the extent that was expected. Therefore, land is available. It was also considered an uneconomical time to sell land. Most members, and I, agree.

Members raised concerns about the level of cuts to InterTradeIreland. There were concerns that cuts would put at risk the stimulation of trade and that the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector across the island of Ireland would suffer. It is important that InterTradeIreland receives adequate funding. Those reductions will not unduly affect its performance, but, nonetheless, it is a very important agency.

Members expressed concerns that reductions in funding to the tourism sector would have a negative impact on that important aspect of the economy and would inhibit activity to strengthen

the economy through the stimulation of tourism. Departmental officials informed the Committee that savings in relation to North/South bodies had already been agreed with the relevant Departments here and in the South, and would have been made regardless of the review of spending plans.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Those are the concerns, which are relevant and proper. I hope that the Minister will take them into consideration.

Mr Shannon: On reading the report, some things stood out right away for every one of us. In 2008-09, the Executive delivered over £10 billion worth of public services, which is the highest figure on record. That is a good news story. That figure included an investment of £1.7 billion in our public infrastructure, which is an increase of over one fifth on the previous year. That had to happen because we were in desperate need of investment. Money had to be spent to put right the neglect that we endured through many years of direct rule. We needed a dedicated strategy to provide better services and infrastructure to help every person in the Province. The Department of Finance and Personnel provided the strategy that was needed to make a difference in Northern Ireland. We need to take on board that key fact.

The Department is again faced with an overwhelming task: balancing the efficiency savings that are needed, of which we are all keenly aware, while ensuring that there is still a proper level of delivery across the board on the part of all Departments. That is an onerous task, but it is achievable.

The report points out clearly that the Northern Ireland Departments have fully reached their efficiency savings targets for 2008-09. An analysis of the last round of taking stock suggests that good progress is being made regarding targets for 2009-2010 and 2010-11. Things are on track at present, and we simply need each Department to keep on making savings where they can on things that are improvable.

The report clearly states that Northern Ireland Departments fully achieved their efficiency savings targets for 2008-09. The latest monitoring round suggests that good progress

has been made in meeting targets for 2009-2010 and 2010-11. Savings are on track at present. We simply need each Department to continue to make savings where they can on non-essential items. Thus far, each Department has been able to make those savings, and it is up to them, individually, to spend wisely the money that they are allocated.

At a glance, Departments such as Health appear to be taking a large hit. However, the report states that savings in health amount to 2.1% of its budget, compared with 2.6% in other Departments. Therefore, the Health Service's importance and ability to thrive and to provide the excellent service currently on offer, while making savings, is recognised. The fact that the Republic of Ireland devotes 35p of every £1 of its Budget to the Health Service, but in Northern Ireland that figure is 50p of every £1, clearly demonstrates the importance of health here.

Members recently debated the Department of Health's dispensary charges, to which improvements can be made. We look forward to that happening. I stress again that in some cases, dispensary services are essential for people who are unwell, but in others, it is simply a way for chemists to make money. We ask for efficiency savings that can be made in that area to be taken on board.

I agree with my colleague Mervyn Storey on the issue of education. Yesterday, the Minister of Education made a statement to the Assembly. Not one of the questions that were asked was answered. Neither did she permit interventions. I read the Hansard report today to see whether the Minister addressed the issue of Glashury College that I raised, and she did not. Nothing was done in reply to Members' enquiries about any of the other schools or colleges. It is frustrating to find ourselves in limbo over the future of education.

The report also highlights proposed savings in DETI and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) of 8.2% and 7.2% below average respectively. We must have roads for tourists to use and thriving businesses for them to spend money in. Every Department must make cuts in the right area, not simply where most money is spent.

I sit on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I am concerned about the farm modernisation plans, the cereal and vegetable producers, our vital fishing industry and the

European Fisheries Fund (EFF) money that it receives, and the Northern Ireland rural development programme. We must ensure that all Departments, including Agriculture and Education, are producing the goods on all those issues. We must cut out the superfluous and concentrate on essential service provision. The rest will come in time, when the returns that are invested in the future of the Province come back to where they are needed.

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

Mr Shannon: That is when everyone — within and without the Chamber — will benefit.

Mr Neeson: I did not think that I would be called to speak but I am grateful for the opportunity. The Programme for Government's main priorities included growing the economy. I am deeply concerned that the proposed cuts in departmental budgets will adversely affect that priority.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I agree with the statement that was made by its Chairman. We received responses on the revised Budget from the Department and from Invest Northern Ireland. The £6 million reduction in Invest NI's capital budget for property projects will impact in several ways. It will delay the further development of land, potentially reduce the amount of land acquired for future development, and delay infrastructure works and other capital improvements to existing industrial estates.

Decisions not to purchase land will impact on Invest NI's ability to meet its overall land acquisition target and on the objective to make land available in areas of economic disadvantage over the corporate planning period.

12.00 noon

I am deeply concerned by the financial cuts in the budgets for Tourism Ireland and InterTradeIreland. It is important that there is continued commitment to signature tourism projects, because they are important to the development of tourism. I would also like to see continued commitment to the Bombardier CSeries project. Those issues are vital to growing the Northern Ireland economy.

Although I have concentrated on the Northern Ireland economy, I wish to express my concerns about the reductions in the Health Service budget. I share the Health Minister's views

on the cuts; it is vital that front line services continue in the Health Service.

In conclusion, I put a question to the Minister: is growing the economy still the same priority for the Minister and the Executive at large?

Mr McDevitt: I echo the comments of the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee, who noted that we are yet to receive a response of any sort from the Health Minister with regard to the proposed spending cuts. Handing a Minister a blank cheque is no way to defend front line services, and that is what the Health Committee has been asked to do. A crisis in our Health Service is imminent because of the Minister's inability to come to the House or to his Committee with specific details as to how efficiencies can be found elsewhere in the system to guarantee that front line services are given the priority that they deserve.

We already know the stories of 90-year-olds on waiting lists. We know that care workers allocate pensioners 15 minutes a week for their single shower. We know that political pressure is being exerted on trusts to give the impression that a crisis does not exist when, in fact, we all know that one is imminent. We also know that much could be done to guarantee front line services in this region. We could see information on the invest to save proposals and we could understand the impact of the proposed cuts on public service agreement targets, which, of course, we do not know. We could know what conversations have taken place between the Health Minister and the Finance Minister. Perhaps the Finance Minister will be so kind as to inform the House of such conversations during his winding-up speech, because we do not know. We could know what the impact will be on trusts and on social services, or, specifically, on the Ambulance Service Trust, because the truth is that we do not know. We could try to understand better the Department's thinking on the Nuffield report, which indicates a disparity between this region and other regions in these islands in respect of the efficiency and productivity of the Health Service, because the truth is that we simply do not know.

The SDLP will stand shoulder to shoulder with any Minister who brings proposals to the House to defend front line services, but we will not write a blank cheque to the Finance Minister or to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, because that is not in the

interests of the elderly, the sick and the poor who so rely on this Health Service, which was inherited from Britain but was made Irish and deserves our defence.

I ask the Finance Minister to try to illuminate us in so far as he can on conversations that he has had with the Health Minister. I ask the House to continue, on a cross-party basis, to support efforts to elucidate information from the Health Minister; information that is simply not forthcoming.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I could amuse the House for a long time by talking of the conversations that I have had with the Health Minister on his budget and budget proposals, but that is not my role here today.

First, I thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its work to date on collating the information that various Committees supplied and on scrutinising the Budget proposals. I shall re-emphasise the reasons for taking such an approach. Normally, next year's Budget would simply have been what was set out three years ago, and adjustments would have been made through the in-year monitoring process. However, as a result of pressures from, and changes in, the economic environment since then, it has become clear that such sizeable changes cannot be dealt with through the normal in-year monitoring process.

In the past, some Members described the reviewing of spending plans as a panic measure that resulted from the mismanagement of the Budget by DFP and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I am glad that that attitude has not been quite so prevalent this morning. There is now a general realisation that economic change requires DFP to deal with changed circumstances for the Budget. That is why the Department conducted a substantial Budget review, and I am glad that Members welcomed that approach.

I shall reiterate the changes that have occurred. We hoped to sell certain assets, but the downturn in the economy has affected our ability to raise revenue in that way. We did not anticipate that we would be required to put money into certain areas of the economy, whether by helping businesses through business rates relief or additional spending on training.

Of course, we brought some problems on ourselves. The Assembly decided to defer the

introduction of water charges for the entire Budget period, and, as a result, incurred a £210 million pressure. As Dr Farry pointed out, if one decides not to raise revenue, one must find money from elsewhere.

In addition, there is the issue of equal pay, which some Members said that we had a moral obligation to address. Indeed, some Members think that we have not gone far enough, and, even though they complain about the current situation, they want us to go beyond the legislative requirements and spend more money. Perhaps I will return to what Mr O'Loan said about that subject later.

Nevertheless, none of those pressures were a consequence of financial mismanagement; they resulted from collective decisions that were taken by the Executive and endorsed by the Assembly. We are where we are with the Budget, and, in response to that, we conducted the Budget review.

I shall pick up on what individual Members said later, but I am disappointed by a common theme that emerged. Committees require relevant information to enable them at least to question whether their Ministers are making the right decisions about necessary budget reductions. However, several Ministers and Departments have not been able or willing to supply that information to their respective Committees.

Although Members talked about current expenditure reductions of 2·6% and capital expenditure reductions of 10·2%, those figures do not represent a cut in the Budget. Much of that is a result of reallocations. I shall address that point in more detail later, but the real Budget reductions amount to only 0·1% in current spending and 1% in capital spending. The widespread consultation that some Members mentioned is not, therefore, required. Those are fairly minor cuts. Nevertheless, the result of some of our decisions is that money will move between Departments.

I made it clear that Ministers have an obligation to supply Committees with information to enable them to do their jobs properly, so it is disappointing that a number of Ministers have not done so. I am glad that the Chairpersons concerned did not hold back from criticising those Ministers, and I hope that Committees will press Departments and Ministers for the information that they need to enable them to do

their jobs properly. Otherwise, the Assembly will not be in a position to carry out its role.

A number of Members, such as the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, raised the issue of methodology and how the Department came to its conclusions. First, we looked at the size of the pressure, which has been well aired in the debate: across budgets, it is 2·6% of current expenditure and 10·2% of capital expenditure, which amounts to around £370 million. Then, I interviewed Ministers. I asked them how they would go about things, and what type of measures they would take if they had to reduce their budgets by x% of capital expenditure and y% of current expenditure. I asked them to tell me about the pressures on their budgets and areas where they believed that they could make savings. Of course, the Department also has information from its frequent contact with finance officials. Ultimately, there was discussion in the Executive.

I have made it clear that the Department wanted to target reductions. It did not simply want to apply reductions across the board, because that would not have been a helpful way to go about it. As a result of information that Departments supplied, conversations that I had with Ministers, discussion in the Executive, and consideration of the Programme for Government priorities, my Department reached its conclusions.

Members must look at variations in reductions. OFMDFM has a 5% reduction in its current budget. When I spoke to Ministers from that Department and looked at the type of issues that it faces, I believed that it was possible to make such a reduction. DETI, on the other hand, concentrates on delivery of the Programme for Government's first priority, which is growth of the economy. It has a reduction of 2·2% in its current expenditure and 8·2% in its capital expenditure, which are both below average. Therefore, some Departments' reductions are below average, while some are above average.

Indeed, despite all of the Health Minister's complaints, his budget is being reduced by significantly less than the average. I took into consideration some of the pressures that he described to me. The current part of his budget is being reduced by 2·1%. Again, my response was based on the conversation that I had with the Minister. I believe that that answers Members' questions on methodology.

The Committee Chairperson also mentioned wider public consultation and the limited timetable for that. I must point out that, as far as the Budget is concerned, I submitted proposals to the Executive in September. That should have allowed for adequate consultation. Delays in the Executive process meant that those proposals could not be addressed until the Budget statement in January 2010. I hope that, as a result of the agreement at Hillsborough, we will get around such issues. I regret that delay, which has curtailed the consultation period. However, I believe that consultation in the Assembly is sufficient, because, as I have said, the actual size of the reduction in the Budget is little.

I noticed that, when I provided figures, Mr O'Loan shook his head. Of course, many of the figures that we discuss are a result of reallocations. Take, for example, water charges. The Department is not actually cutting money out of the total Budget; it is simply saying that, because there is pressure on DRD as a result of the deferment of water charges, rather than DRD bearing the entire brunt of that, the £210 million will be shared among other Departments to release the pressure that was created in DRD as a result of an Executive decision. The same applies to the £26 million for invest to save. That money is not being cut; it is simply being held and will be distributed among Departments when they come forward with proposals. That is how the discrepancy between the gross figure and net figure arises.

12.15 pm

Ian Paisley Jnr stated that the information from DARD was fairly limited and that it was provided only a short time before the Committee was due to meet. That was an issue for the Minister and the Department. He also said that the information that was received from the Department showed that the Department was targeting soft options. I think that it has been made clear that one of the reasons why we wanted Ministers to supply information was to give Committees time to see whether there were other ways in which the reductions could be made.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I want to get through as many contributions as I can, so I do not want to give way.

Mr Kennedy is not in his place. I am not sure whether he got the right debate today. Approximately 95% of his contribution was about the review of in-year monitoring, but we are reviewing next year's Budget. I was interested in what he had to say, however. Some of his contribution was contradictory. He mentioned the problems that are associated with in-year monitoring but, if I picked him up right, he subsequently said that he wanted more frequent in-year monitoring rounds. He is not here to explain those comments, but I am sure that we will have this looked at on another occasion, because we want to review the budgetary process. There are problems, regardless of which route we go down. There are difficulties with in-year monitoring, overcommitments and contingency funds, but the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel highlighted the budgetary process in her speech, and it is an area on which the Department is open to suggestions.

Mr O'Loan talked about the "atmosphere of financial crisis". We are not in a financial crisis. Nor are our circumstances a result of inadequate management. As I stated, the actual reduction in the Budget is fairly small. Reallocations in the Budget are causing pressures for each Department. I know that reductions always make the headlines, but Members should not forget that we are spending more this year than we have ever spent on capital investment in Northern Ireland. We are spending 20% more than we were spending at the beginning of this Budget period. As a result, we have rescued a lot of jobs in the construction industry. Although there are pressures — pressures that every Administration faces — it is wrong to describe our circumstances as some kind of financial crisis. There will always be those problems.

Mr O'Loan raised a number of other issues. He talked about the water costs and water charges. However, I have heard no one from his party suggest that we should introduce water charges. That is the issue. Mr Farry was the only Member to acknowledge the case for water charges in today's debate, and I will come to his contribution in a minute or two. At least he stuck his neck out and said that if we wanted to continue to provide services at a certain level

and if Departments believed that they could not make efficiencies, we would have to address additional forms of revenue. I do not agree with him, however. Rather than looking at raising revenue, our first option should be to consider how best to use the money that we have. If we conclude that we are making the best use of that money, we will have to raise revenue if we want to have more services. There is no point in complaining about water charges, but not being prepared to raise your hand in favour of introducing them.

Mr O'Loan also talked about the equal pay issue and the range in figures of between £155 million and £170 million. I think that I have explained in the House why that range has been given. It is being used because we have to interview each of the 13,000 individuals who are involved. Their circumstances will have to be looked at, and our best guess is that the range will be between £155 million and £170 million. Mr O'Loan is right; there will be an ongoing annual cost to Departments as a result of the equal pay issue.

He asked about the inclusion of retired workers in the scheme. The legislation is clear that people must make a claim within six months of leaving the Civil Service. Due to the date on which the claim was lodged by the unions, the cut-off date is as has been set out. That is what the equality legislation indicates. If the Member is saying that we should go beyond the equality legislation and its requirements, we must look at the rationale for that and the attached costs.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, I want to refer to as many other Members' contributions as possible.

Mr O'Loan talked about the need to target our reductions: I hope that I have answered that question already. The fact that different Departments are affected in different ways is an indication that we targeted, and tried to target, along the lines of the Programme for Government priorities and as a result of conversations that I had with Ministers about how they spend their money at present.

I am not sure whether Dr Farry will be the next defector from the Alliance Party to the Tories. I know that Mr Parsley has left. Dr Farry started off talking like a Tory when he said that we did not fix the roof while the sun was shining. How

often have we heard David Cameron at that one? The Member has even got Cameron's language. You boys over on those Benches should watch out for the company that Dr Farry keeps in North Down, because you may find that you will have another defection from your party in the near future.

Dr Farry raised a number of issues about the structural defects that we had and the limit that there would be on putting those right in the future. However, he paints a rather gloomy picture. Although we need to spend money on infrastructure in Northern Ireland, and our ability to do so will be reduced, we must also take cognisance of the fact that, as a result of the recession, we can get better value for money and get more contracts for every pound that we spend. Whether the fall in the cost of doing the work will match some of the capital reductions is another matter. Mr Storey made the point that we are getting discounts of between 20% and 25% on school contracts, which means that we can get more for our money.

Dr Farry raised the important issue that we should not think that the simple and easy option is to cut administration in order to save front line services. I recognise his point, and I do not think that I have ever suggested that. Time and again I have said in discussions, and publicly in the Assembly, that if we are looking at how we use the Budget, we should determine whether savings can be made in administrative costs, whether things are being done inefficiently, whether Departments are doing things that they should not be doing, and whether there are things that Departments are doing that should be done differently. Those are the issues that Committees and Ministers should be looking at.

Dr Farry also raised the issue of whether we should have raised some of the money by increasing taxes. I point out to him that had we tried to meet all of those pressures by raising the domestic rate, for example, we would have had to increase it up by 140%. I do not think that any Member would want us to go down that route at this time.

Mr McLaughlin talked about the budget process and the importance of having transparency. We are subject to the information that we receive from the Treasury, and it will give us the information on the next CSR period. Despite all our attempts to push the Treasury on that matter, we have not got that information yet.

Together with the Finance Ministers from Scotland and Wales, I raised those issues at quadrilateral meetings. If we have the information on time, we are prepared to see how it can be given to the Committee, the Executive and the Assembly for proper discussion before Budgets are made.

I thank the other Members who spoke in the debate and apologise for the fact that I did not get a chance to answer all of their questions individually. No doubt we will have a rerun of the debate next week, when I will concentrate on those Members' contributions that I was unable to respond to today.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Weir to conclude the debate. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr Weir: I thought that I had 15 minutes.

Mr Speaker: The Member has 15 minutes.

Mr Weir: That is DUP negotiation. I have just achieved an extra five minutes, although Members may regret that in about 10 minutes' time. Indeed, some heckling is coming from the Back Benches already.

This debate on the review of the 2010-11 spending plans for the Northern Ireland Departments has been very useful. As the Minister said, despite Members' occasional attempts to stray outside the subject, we have largely kept to the confines of the motion. In the words of the popular entertainer Bruce Forsyth, we have had a "good game, good game" today. I thank Members for their contributions.

During last Monday's debate on the savings that could be made in the Health Service through the use of the performance and efficiency delivery unit, reference was made to the fact that there is a tendency for debates that are on the important issue of financial allocation to have a tit-for-tat quality. Indeed, some Members described last week's debate as "puerile". However, the tone of today's debate has been mature and focused. We have not had a steamer of a debate, and to some extent, I suspect that the Minister may have been disappointed that that was the case. I am sure that Mr McNarry's absence is purely coincidental to the fact that we have had such a focused and measured debate.

The wide-ranging nature of the debate is another element that has been to our advantage. Not counting those Members who are on the

Committee for Finance and Personnel, I think that nine representatives of the 11 Statutory Committees spoke on behalf of their Committees in their capacity as either Committee Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson. Consequently, we heard a wide range of views on the implications of departmental expenditure on those Committees. However, I will come to a caveat on that in a moment. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel said, today's debate will help to inform that Committee's co-ordinated report on the review of the 2010-11 spending plans.

The Minister dealt with Members' comments, so I will touch on some later. Before that, however, I will pick out several themes that emerged in the debate. Undoubtedly, a prevalent theme in many Members' contributions was the concern about the lack of briefings that Departments give to the Statutory Committees. The Minister told the House that he brought his proposals to the Executive in September 2009. That means that the plethora of complaints that have been voiced today clearly demonstrates that the fault lies with the individual Departments. I will deal with some of the individual problems in a moment.

However, it was noticeable that the problem between Committees and Departments was not universal. Indeed, Dolores Kelly, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Alban Maginness, the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and, to some extent, the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee indicated that there had been a good level of engagement between their Committees and departmental officials. However, it is clear that there is a lack of openness and transparency between many Departments and their respective Committees. Indeed, it seems that those Departments treat openness and transparency in the same way that John Terry treats those issues with his wife. Many of the Departments seem to have somewhat of a hidden agenda.

I now turn to some of the comments that individual Members made. Speaking as the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Ian Paisley Jnr highlighted that Committee's concern at the absence of detail that DARD provided on its proposals. He said that, on one occasion, the Committee received a briefing paper from the Department just one hour before officials were due to appear before it. The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister

and deputy First Minister, Danny Kennedy, raised a similar complaint and said that that Committee had not received papers or briefings from the Department. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michelle O'Neill, spoke about that Committee's dealings with the Health Department. Judging from Mrs O'Neill's and, indeed, Conall McDevitt's contributions, there seems to be not only a concern at the lack of transparency on the Department's part but a palpable sense of anger that it was not giving the Committee the necessary details and that it was ducking issues. Furthermore, there seems to be a concern that the Department is hiding behind the belief that it should be sheltered from any financial change. Given the importance of health, that is a grave concern.

12.30 pm

Barry McElduff, as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Mervyn Storey, as Chairperson of the Committee for Education, highlighted points of a similar nature, one being that there was a failure to supply the full amount of information. It is important that the Finance Committee examines the approaches taken by Departments to briefing their Committees. In her opening statement, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel dealt with the internal situation of the Department. The Finance Committee and the Finance Department find themselves in a different position to the other Departments and Committees in that they have an overarching role. As a Committee, we want to seek assurances that Committees are being properly briefed, because, if they are not, they cannot feed that information to us. We will be looking at the wider processes.

The point was made that, when it comes to redistribution, the focus tends to be on the resource element of financing, but, in their three significant contributions, Ian Paisley Jnr, Mervyn Storey and Mitchel McLaughlin highlighted the impact of capital spend. Mr Paisley Jnr spoke about Crossnacreevy and the major impact that making a mistake on capital spend can have. Mervyn Storey highlighted the impact on the schools programme and the problem of a lack of information leading to a lack of certainty in the sector. Mitchel McLaughlin, in a valuable contribution, spoke about the problem of capital realisation. It is not simply a question of raising more money by selling off whatever we have.

A bargain-basement asset sale would be very foolish in the current circumstances. However, there is no doubt that the lack of capital realisation has had a major impact on the broader budgetary situation.

A number of Members, including Mitchel McLaughlin and Danny Kennedy, spoke about the monitoring round process, which, as the Minister indicated, lies outside the scope of the debate. However, a number of Members wanted to see if we can improve the Budget process in the future. There is an opportunity for us to see if we can create a more thematic approach. As part of the ongoing review of the Executive Budget process that DFP is considering, the Finance Committee will continue to press DFP on that issue.

In the contributions from members of different Committees, a wide range of public expenditure pressures was outlined, probably stretching across every area of departmental expenditure. It is natural that any Committee Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson will be pressing for their share of the cake.

A number of Members, including Declan O'Loan, Simon Hamilton and Stephen Farry, spoke about two key issues: the impact of the equal pay settlement and the impact of water charges. Had a different approach been taken to, for example, equal pay, we would, undoubtedly, have found ourselves in a very different financial situation. We have to cope with that and bear it in mind.

The situation in relation to water charges has been highlighted. It is undoubtedly the case that all the parties in the Executive have taken a particular line, living up to commitments on water charges that were given to the public. However, it is also the case, as the Minister has highlighted in the past, that that involves some opportunity cost. The wider issue of water charging is one that I believe we will come back to fairly regularly.

During the debate, Members referred to specific public expenditure issues, such as the RPA and the pressures on health, agriculture, DCAL, education and DETI.

Sean Neeson pressed the issue of ensuring that proper resources were available for tourism, which he views as an important device. John Dallat mentioned the issue of having proper regulation and financing for the Department of

the Environment to ensure that people do not abuse the environment.

Anyone who looks at the issue will have to bear in mind the fact that there are financial pressures, but, as Simon Hamilton and others said, the Executive have taken positive initiatives to try to reduce the burden on householders and on business. Clearly, there is a range of competing pressures, and it is impossible for the Executive to always satisfy those demands. It is important to ensure that the impact from the available resources is maximised.

Stephen Farry raised the issue of revenue-raising measures. A debate took place between him and Simon Hamilton about alternative options, particularly on different funding streams such as increased regional rates. The potential impact of increasing regional rates is limited. As the Minister pointed out, they would have to increase by 140% to meet some of the demands.

A number of Members highlighted the need to ensure that maximum efficiency gains are made where appropriate so that the focus of savings is on administration and on back room services rather than on attacking front line services. Stephen Farry made the point well that that can sometimes be a difficult line to draw. Indeed, what one person can assess to be a back room service can be assessed as a front line service by another.

The Finance Committee has taken evidence from a number of expert witnesses on the best-practice approach to realising efficiencies while protecting front line delivery. The Committee will return to that in a forthcoming report. Although the Committee did not have the time to schedule evidence from the wider public, it received submissions from the Confederation of British Industry and the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland. That evidence will be included in the report.

In the past couple of months, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has been considering actively the strategic and cross-cutting issues that Departments face. As the Chairperson said, the current issue is to do with the spending plans, but we must also look to the future. In the coming weeks, the Committee will give thorough consideration to the responses that we receive from other Statutory Committees to the ongoing review. Although a caveat has been added because of the lack of information that a number of the Committees have had, hopefully

the situation will become unblocked in the next few weeks.

The Chairperson highlighted the Committee's concerns about the pressures that have emerged since the 2008-2011 Budget was agreed and about the need to settle on a formal Budget process for future years. Therefore, the Committee looks forward to receiving the outcome of the review of the Executive's Budget process that DFP is undertaking. The Committee intends to use its report on the review of the 2010-11 spending plans not only to consider the immediate pressures for the forthcoming financial year but to look towards more strategic issues going forward. A number of Members highlighted the fact that the landscape is likely to change in the next few years, whatever Government is in power at Westminster.

The Committee will hold an additional meeting with the Minister on Thursday to discuss the review proposals with him. At its meeting on 17 February, it will receive a further briefing on strategic financial issues, and, at that meeting, it will also take evidence from Land and Property Services on the implications of the revised spending plans for the agency. The Committee aims to publish its report as soon as possible thereafter.

The debate has been useful, and, on behalf of the Committee, I thank Members and the Minister for their contributions, which I believe will lead to a mature reflection by the Committee on this important topic.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the review of 2010-11 spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments announced on 12 January 2010 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.40 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Committee Business

Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees

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 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 the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the social and environmental importance of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann regions and the economic contribution they make through employment, leisure and tourism; acknowledges the significance of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees in maintaining the value of these areas and the risks involved if funding of the advisory committees is withdrawn; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to reinstate Northern Ireland Environment Agency funding as a matter of urgency, and to encourage the other funding partners to continue their financial support.

I welcome the presence of the Minister for the debate. I will provide the House with a bit of background information on the motion. Established in 1994, the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees have received core funding from the Department of the Environment (DOE) through its Northern Ireland Environment Agency natural heritage division, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) inland waterways body and nine local councils: Antrim Borough Council, Ballymena Borough Council, Ballymoney Borough Council, Coleraine Borough Council, Cookstown District Council, Craigavon Borough Council, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, Lisburn City Council and Magherafelt District Council.

After a request from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in early summer 2009, the committees carried out a review of their work and structure and made recommendations on structures and ways of working. That review was considered by the

funding bodies in August 2009, and DOE and DCAL highlighted the fact that they would allocate funding for 2010-11 if local authorities also came on board. The Environment Agency sent local authorities a letter asking for financial commitment to the structure.

In November 2009, DOE and DCAL said that they would not allocate future core funding, as funding commitments were not forthcoming from a minority of the nine local councils involved. The chairperson of the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee wrote to a member of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Ford, at the end of November 2009. The Committee considered that letter at its meeting on 3 December, when members agreed to invite the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees to brief members at the meeting on 21 January 2010. At that meeting, the Committee heard that the decision to cut funding was not based on quality of service and value for money; that there had been no independent review of the work of the advisory committees; that little was done by NIEA and DCAL to encourage dissenting local authorities, which had, according to the advisory committees, all since indicated that they supported the advisory committees; that, after being approached by advisory committee members, eight of the nine local authorities had already indicated that the allocation of financial support was very likely if central government renewed its commitment to the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann structure; that no opportunity was given to review administration costs; and that the committees were an easy target, as savings were needed at that time.

Members also heard about fears that the cuts in funding would lead to a lack of co-ordination, a loss of focus on sustainable and integrated development, an inappropriate allocation of resources, a lack of on-the-ground stimulation of projects that deliver against departmental remits and a risk of failing adequately to meet European obligations under the water framework directive for public participation in the development and delivery of river basin action plans.

At the same meeting, the Committee heard from an NIEA official that the two committees have been very successful and have ensured that the management and development of those two strategically important waterways have been properly and effectively co-ordinated during their lifetime. The official also made it clear that

NIEA would not take over that role should the withdrawal of funding lead to the disbandment of the two committees.

At the meeting, members decided to write to the Department to ask for a list of the councils involved in the funding of the advisory committees; details of the Department's communication with the councils involved, including an update on the councils' current position on funding the advisory committees; and details of whether communications on that issue were with the full council or with council officials. We also decided to write to the advisory committees asking them to forward details of a possible revision of their budgets because, at our meeting, members of the committees said that, had they been asked whether they were willing to reduce their overhead administration costs, they would have said that they were.

We wrote to the Minister, stating the Committee's support for the work of the advisory committees, expressing disappointment at the lack of opportunity for them to provide revised budgets or propose efficiency savings and expressing concern that no independent evaluation of their work had been carried out. We also wrote to the nine councils involved to ascertain their current position on continued funding to the groups.

The above actions show that the motion is not a knee-jerk reaction to the situation in which the advisory committees find themselves. Members of the Environment Committee want to provide the nine councils and the Department with an opportunity to give their side of the story. However, the Committee is mindful that funding for the advisory committees will end in March 2010 and that, therefore, there is an urgent need to get the motion to the Floor of the House before that.

Two of the nine councils involved in funding have written to the Committee to say that they will make a decision in February on whether they will fund the advisory committees in 2010-11. I am of the firm opinion that, if NIEA continued its funding, the councils involved would do the same. The Committee is concerned that the advisory committees were not afforded the opportunity to present revised budgets or indicate efficiency savings and that no independent evaluation of their work was ever completed.

As I said, we are very conscious that savings need to be made across all Departments, and the DOE is certainly no exception. However,

we are worried that, without an evaluation, the community and voluntary sector and non-governmental bodies are a soft target for such cuts. I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that there has been no recognition of the ability of groups from those sectors to draw down European Union funding, something in which the two advisory committees have been successful.

The short-term decision to withdraw funding could cost more in the long term, due to there being no ready-made replacement for the advisory committees and to increasing obligations on government to consult and engage with stakeholders and the public on water management issues. The loss of the groups would be detrimental to the plans for transforming Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann into attractive propositions for tourism and leisure.

The vision for the Lower Bann is for a vibrant, multifunctional waterway where recreational activities and the natural, built and cultural heritage are appreciated and well managed, where there is a thriving indigenous economy supporting local jobs and where users respect each other and the local landscape. Last year, a management strategy directing the actions to achieve that vision was put in place, and that will run until 2014. However, without the support of the Lower Bann Advisory Committee, it is likely to founder.

There are other examples of what would happen as a result of the withdrawal of funding. There would be a loss of approximately £100,000 in already secured project funding; a loss of up to £300,000 of funding for live funding applications; and the potential loss of a landscape-scale heritage project planned for next year, which could attract more than £1 million in funding. That project is something that the DOE would not be able to do by itself under the funding criteria.

The absence of an organisation to steer the implementation of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann biodiversity action plans would be a loss to us all. Those plans are already delivering against Northern Ireland biodiversity targets, which, of course, are a statutory obligation.

That is a snapshot of the Committee's concerns. In summary, the Committee appreciates the funding pressures that we face but urges the Department to look carefully at the long-term impacts of the decisions that it

makes to address those pressures. We want the Department to work with the non-governmental groups it funds and give them the opportunity and time to bring forward solutions that will allow them to continue their work, albeit in a more constrained way. We want to make sure that independent evaluations are carried out on work funded by the Department, so that, in difficult times such as now, the Department's funding partners and the public can readily see where money has been cost-effectively spent in previous years.

I stress that the Committee is not calling for the Department to make up the shortfall created by other funders. However, the Department must encourage other funders — the nine councils whose regions benefit significantly from the work of the advisory committees — to continue their support. The Department should reinstate its funding accordingly.

I commend the motion to the House and ask all Members for their support.

Mr I McCrea: I speak as a member of the Environment Committee, which tabled the motion. I declare an interest as a member of Cookstown District Council, which is one of the nine councils that were involved in the funding of the advisory committees. My council's position is and always has been that it will commit to funding the advisory committees if all the other councils do so. That is not a definitive position, because we have not reached the end of the process.

The main issue is how we move forward, rather than where we are and how we got here. As Members are aware, the advisory committees were established in 1994 by the Department of the Environment and the then Department of Agriculture. Therefore, the funding of advisory committees should remain a central government issue instead of being passed over to local government. As the Chairperson said, councils have benefited from advisory committees and should continue to fund them.

Along with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, nine councils are involved in the funding of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees. However, according to the officials from the Department of the Environment who gave evidence to our Committee, only three of those councils decided not to contribute in any way, namely Dungannon and South Tyrone

Borough Council, Magherafelt District Council and Ballymoney Borough Council. It is the right of any council to decide whether or not to fund an outside body, but that is not the real issue that faces us today. The real issue is that the two Departments decided to withdraw funding solely because three councils decided not to fund the committees. During their evidence to the Environment Committee, I asked members of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees whether they would be willing to work with a lower budget and with fewer councils. I, like other Committee members, was not surprised that they were willing to accept that.

I have a copy of revised budget options for 2010-11 from the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees. If that had been put on the table or had even been requested by the two Departments, we would not be debating the issue today, because the two Departments would undoubtedly have been willing to negotiate with a lower number of councils. It is not fair that local councils have to carry the blame for the process not moving forward. I am concerned that the futures of the advisory committees lie in the hands of three councils. However, I have recently been informed that we now have only one council that has not committed to funding the committees.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House to respond to the Committee's motion. Will he task his officials to sit down with the advisory committees to work out how the issues can be resolved, either through a revised budget or through a lower number of councils committing their funding? It is also important that we find out what the officials in his Department did to encourage the councils that took the decision to withdraw their funding to reconsider. Is he willing to allow the future of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees to be left in the hands of one council?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McEluff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an deis labhairt ar an ábhar seo. I welcome the opportunity to address the House. My job is to convey the state of play as far as the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is concerned. The Committee has discussed the matter.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory

committees on Thursday 7 January. At that meeting, the Committee was concerned to learn of the possibility that the funding of those two advisory committees might not be continued beyond March 2010. Given that the Department and the Environment Agency have been responsible for providing central government funding for the advisory committees, the Committee agreed to seek the views of Mr Nelson McCausland, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, on the situation.

2.15 pm

The Minister replied to the Committee stating that the nine local authorities have not confirmed their funding support for the advisory committees post March 2010. However, having listened to other Members, including Ian McCrea, I understand that it may be a changing situation. Of course, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure remains actively involved and interested in the matter. However, if the local authorities provide that written commitment by 26 February, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Environment Agency will meet to discuss the possibility of funding the committees for 2010-11. That is contingent on the written commitment being made before the end of February. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure welcomes the offer from the Department and the Environment Agency, and we hope that the matter can be resolved speedily and to the satisfaction of everyone concerned.

Mr Kinahan: I am extremely pleased to speak in support of the motion today. I declare an interest as a councillor in south Antrim and as a member of the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee, albeit one who has not been able to attend as much as I would like.

The minutes from meetings of the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee demonstrate its involvement in a phenomenal range of matters, including water pollution, bathing, navigation, eels, sand trading, water levels, flotsam and rubbish, tourism and canoe trails. The committee discusses 70 or 80 different issues at each meeting. However, we must not forget that it serves one of the most heavily designated wetland areas in Europe and, therefore, has a strong need for biodiversity.

The committee, which meets monthly, provides a perfect example of the joined-up government that we all want to see. DCAL works on sport

and tourism, and the Department of the Environment works on planning, councils and biodiversity. Despite a little hiccup today, they work well together. Both Departments must provide the necessary funding. Furthermore, nine councils already work together, although we need to bring two more on board. However, most importantly, we have the personalities that we need. Farmers and wildlife enthusiasts, fishermen and canoeists, developers and environmentalists, and many other diverse users are all having to learn how to work together.

At the moment, the cost is £37,000 to each Department and some £5,000 to the various councils, which does not seem much. However, the expert volunteers that join us from 24 different groups do not cost anything. They give their time freely and, therefore, enable us to save a fortune on consultants. We know that we must consider cuts, and the bodies are happy to consider the various options that Ian McCrea outlined. We accept that the NIEA and the councils must make cuts, but I question whether the NIEA analysed where those cuts should be made as well as it could have. I am unsure whether making cuts at the coalface instead of in the offices is the most effective and efficient way to operate.

Today we ask for a way in which the funding of the advisory committees can remain in place. The councils were strapped for cash and wanted to keep their rates down. They did their best, but it is necessary to consider a better way to liaise with them and to bring them all on board. The Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees are not the only bodies that are affected; the same matters affect the Mourne Heritage Trust, the Lagan Valley Regional Park and the Belfast Hills Partnership. The future of all those organisations should be considered, because they are vital to tourism and to the management of the beautiful countryside in which we live.

During the Committee's recent visit to Brussels, members realised that a mass of legislation is coming our way and that most of it will be accompanied by fines. We must ask whether cutting the funding of important bodies such as the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees is the way forward. Such bodies have the expertise and the people in place who, over the past few years, have planned for and know the way forward. We know that they have secured £100,000 in project funds for next

year and are working for another £300,000. The advisory committees have impartial experts who work together to implement and co-ordinate strategies.

I want the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee to work, and I want its funding to be reinstated. Friendly pressure should be put on the councils to get them all on board.

Mr Ford: I declare my membership of Antrim Borough Council, which is one of the nine councils that is responsible for the region in question. Furthermore, although this is not a formal declaration, I should point out that I was a founder member of both advisory committees when they were set up in 1994 and for a period of years after that.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Member admit responsibility for the problems that we are facing today?

Mr Ford: No, but the Member will use his historical experience to explain why he thinks the advisory committees served a valuable function over those years and how they built on the difficult position that existed before that time. Now that the Member has put me completely off my train of thought, I shall do my best to recover.

The motion not only refers to the work of the advisory committees but asks the Assembly to recognise the significance of the Neagh/Bann system as the most important waterway in Northern Ireland. With due respect to Members who may have an affinity for the River Lagan or the River Foyle, the whole of Northern Ireland society depends to some extent on what happens in and around the Neagh/Bann system. We have to recognise both its international and local importance.

The nature of our system of government has determined that the advisory committees' funding is an issue for nine local councils and a number of Departments, specifically DCAL and DOE through NIEA. However, issues such as river management reflect on the work of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment outlined the recent position that was adopted in the wake of debates on funding for the advisory committees. She highlighted the work that the advisory committees have done, as well as that that

needs to be done. Indeed, the committees are the obvious vehicles for that work.

In response to Ian McCrea's invitation, I will relate some of the history of the situation. Prior to 1994, a voluntary association existed that sought to bring together users of Lough Neagh in particular in a variety of forms. Although that body succeeded as much as a voluntary committee could, it was not able to bring people together because it did not have the same clout as the advisory committees have gained through their involvement with councils and Departments. That has made a huge difference to what could be achieved.

I can remember some of the advisory committees' early meetings. The balance that had to be struck between the economic, environmental and social and cultural interests around Lough Neagh showed that it was not easy to deal with the needs of, for example, the sand industry while dealing with tourism interests, such as shooting or boating on the lough. All kinds of interests had to be brought together. The broadly based representative advisory committees on the lough and the River Bann have enabled that balance to be struck in a way that has been extremely positive in the management of that waterway system. Striking that balance also provided a considerable bonus in that there has been a voluntary input that would not have otherwise existed.

Given the raft of EU legislation to which Danny Kinahan referred and the existing levels of European protection on that waterway, it is inconceivable that any other part of these islands would not have a joined-up approach to the management of such an important waterway. It seems that, because two or three councils were somewhat reticent about their responsibilities, the entire structure could now be lost. It is noticeable that the great majority of councils are saying that they will participate in funding and assisting the management of the Neagh/Bann system if others do the same. That seems to me to be the point where positive movement can be made. It is also the point at which we start to see the costs and benefits of the entire approach since 1994. Although there is undoubtedly a cost to Departments, the voluntary contribution of time, ability and advice far exceeds the costs to the two Departments of managing the system. It has brought together diverse interests in a way that has allowed a more positive style of management than would

otherwise have been achieved. It is what we stand to lose if, for the sake of a few thousand pounds, we tell people that the most important waterway system in Northern Ireland does not matter that much.

This is a positive example of joined-up government, of which we have few enough examples in Northern Ireland, and it is an example that we cannot afford to lose.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the debate, because the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann regions have a direct impact on my constituency and are important areas for the future. However, I am concerned about funding. I understand that the Environment Agency will consider matching any investment by the local councils involved in managing that water system. That is welcome, but I also understand that not all the councils have committed themselves to providing that funding. If that is the case, I have concerns that there may not be unanimous support for the way forward.

The potential of Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann for tourism is huge, and I hope that the councils that have not yet committed to providing funding will consider that. However, I understand that their budgets are under as much strain as those of the Assembly. The Assembly, through the Environment Agency, is prepared to continue funding for the protection and development of that water system. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to ask that the areas that will definitely benefit from any improvements should help to protect and develop the system.

I am also interested to learn whether some of the costs of managing the system could be reduced. The costs seem to be high, considering that some of that management is voluntary. As Departments are required to make savings, I ask that all bodies funded by those Departments do the same. We are all aware that funding for many of the core functions of government is extremely tight, and I am concerned about spending money on projects that can afford to wait until better times, even though I recognise the potential of such projects.

I appreciate that much work has been done to enhance the Lower Bann, but I have reservations about funding until all the issues have been resolved. In spite of having reservations, however, I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: Some 43% of Northern Ireland's rivers flow into Lough Neagh. It is the biggest fresh-water lake in the British Isles. It is a valuable natural resource that must be managed to ensure that it has a sustainable future. Lough Neagh is important to the local economy through eel fishing and sand for the construction industry. It is important to the leisure industry, and it is becoming increasingly important to the tourism industry, particularly with the plan to expand the Erne waterway and link up with the Ulster canal. Lough Neagh is also a considerable source of water for Northern Ireland Water. Therefore, we must manage the area carefully. The Lower Bann waterway looks after some 38% of water that flows in Northern Ireland. It is a significant area, so it is important that we ensure that it is managed sustainably. That was a key function of the advisory committees.

Local council reorganisation is due in 2011. That is not far away, and we still hope that the great deal of work done on that to date will not result in deadlock, as seems to be the case at present. Therefore, we have to continue to plan on the assumption that that reorganisation will work. Greater powers will pass to those local councils in planning and community planning, and they will have a more proactive role in economic development. The Lough Neagh and Lower Bann regions will be key areas for much of the work of those councils in exercising those powers and in assisting the economy there.

There have already been significant moves to form a link with the Erne waterway. There is huge potential to introduce the boating fraternity further into the area, and tourism opportunities and money will flow from that.

2.30 pm

Other areas covered by the committees are biodiversity and water quality. A focus on those areas is vital if Northern Ireland is to avoid infraction proceedings under European directives. The water framework directive requires water quality to be greatly improved, particularly in the Lough Neagh area, where there have been problems. Those committees enable local knowledge to be passed to the Department, which will greatly assist the Department in meeting the requirements of that directive.

A key aim of the advisory committees is to protect the environment and to encourage biodiversity. There are many examples of projects that they have become involved in. Improving biodiversity

also improves water quality. Lough Neagh is a major source of our drinking water, so by driving up the water quality in the lough, we are ensuring that there is a better quality of drinking water in Northern Ireland. I am thinking of the capture of water at Dunore Point and Castor Bay as well.

The advisory committees have been funded by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and DCAL, with the support of councils. However, it would appear that some councils have become lukewarm in their support. The latest information that I have suggests that the councils in Ballymoney, Dungannon and Magherafelt have not provided funding for this year or given any commitment for further years, although that information may have changed.

Are we to allow the advisory committees to fall because of the actions of three councils? I suggest to the Minister that the Department should be more proactive in ensuring that there is greater awareness of the importance of those committees. If there is a funding issue, the Department should proactively work to ensure that agreed budgets can be settled. Like others, I have been presented with revised budgets that propose 40% cuts in an attempt to provide more efficient operations so that greater value for money can be obtained.

Much valuable work has taken place in the past. Creating partnership working with a diverse group of people from different backgrounds is very difficult but it seems to have worked well in this case, to the benefit of everyone.

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

Mr Beggs: It would be easy to destroy such an organisation but very difficult to recreate it. I urge the Minister to engage proactively to ensure that funding will continue.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Committee for the Environment for agreeing to table the motion. Today's debate is very important, and I am pleased that the Minister of the Environment is present. However, I am rather sad that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has sent a letter to Barry McElduff that rules out funding. I do not want to be particularly cruel to any Minister, but that smacks of a kind of arrogance. That is not good.

All of us dream of a day when the River Shannon, the River Erne, the Lower Bann and Lough Neagh are connected through the Ulster canal. Such a development is particularly important to people in the Coleraine area. It is critical to create well-paid and sustainable jobs in tourism. The kind of success that we have seen on the River Shannon and on the River Erne brings with it the building of hotels and boatyards and the employment of workers in allied trades.

Only yesterday, Mr McCausland wrote to me admitting that no government body has overall responsibility for the Lower Bann. The Rivers Agency has an important role, but only in regards to flooding. It cannot intervene in a positive way. Waterways Ireland has a critical role to play and has done its best, although I would like to see it doing more.

In the absence of any overall statutory responsibility for co-ordinating Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann, it has been left to the two advisory committees to protect the rivers, on a voluntary basis, through biodiversity schemes, which will prove invaluable in the future. A day will come when the River Bann truly realises its full potential as one of the most wonderful rivers on these islands.

I would love to know who in the Departments has the capacity, wisdom, vision, commitment and knowledge to take on, perhaps on a voluntary basis, the role that is played by the two committees. The suggestion to withdraw the funding of the advisory committees is madness personified.

I am sure that the Minister of the Environment would not suggest that the Environment Agency has the capacity to take over all the activities that those two committees undertake, including providing strategic and co-ordinated advice; stimulating and advising on projects; co-ordinating action; sourcing and directing funding; and liaising with stakeholders and statutory agents on the implementation of the water framework directive. The two Departments that are involved must let us know about the vision for the future. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which has jointly funded the committees, must not take its guidance from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

It is not very clever to kill off a couple of committees that have a proud record of achievement on environmental issues and that

deal with two of our most important assets, namely Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann. I appeal to the two relevant Ministers to get up on the balcony and look down on the bigger picture. They should look at the vision for the future, when all the ingredients that make up our wonderful waterways will come together and provide an industry that creates jobs.

I will finish by telling a wee story. A dignitary, who was visiting from a neighbouring island and who is also a potential future king, looked into the river in my presence and said:

"What have you got here? Pea soup?"

We have hopefully overcome that environmental issue. In the future, we will create infrastructure, attract investment from the private sector, build hotels and provide all the other activities that will offer hope to our young people. However, we will not do all that by killing off two advisory committees that work on a voluntary basis.

Mr Savage: I support the motion that was proposed by the Chairman of the Committee for the Environment. I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and a board member of the Lagan Canal Restoration Trust. As a member of those bodies, I value the economic and tourism benefits that are created by Lough Neagh, the Lagan canal and all the other waterways across Northern Ireland. I also wish to put on record my thanks to the members of the various groups who have given their time and expertise.

I am a member of a council that borders Lough Neagh and an MLA for Upper Bann, a constituency that is important to many of the Members in the Chamber today. We appreciate the scenic beauty and recreation facilities that are afforded by the shores of Lough Neagh. It is essential that funding is provided to ensure that the work of the advisory committees can continue. I accept that there is a financial need, at local and central government level, to consider the potential for streamlining those groups within a time frame that is congruent with the review of public administration transition. That would ensure that the work continues and that the expertise of the people who are involved is not lost.

I respectfully ask the Minister to find a third way to fund the committees for the next financial year on the condition that they streamline going forward. That will, in turn, create much needed

efficiencies. I would appreciate the Minister's thoughts on that suggestion. I remind the Minister that Members who sit on councils recognise it as imperative that local councils do their bit to fund the committees and to ensure that years of endeavour and expertise are not lost.

Let us not forget that Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles. It has won many national and international awards and designations, right across the board. In that context, we have a duty to ensure that the work that has made Lough Neagh what it is today continues, tomorrow and for many years to come. It is right that Members do all that we can to preserve the economic, leisure and tourism benefits of Lough Neagh for the next generation and those to come. To that end, I fully recognise the social and environmental importance of Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann and the areas adjacent to those waters, including the contribution that they make to employment, leisure and tourism. We should acknowledge the significance of Lough Neagh and the various advisory committees in maintaining the value of those areas, and the risks involved in withdrawing the funding for the advisory committees. That is a very important point.

Some day, if the Minister has time to spend in his travels around Northern Ireland, I ask that he goes to Lough Neagh and looks at the number of boats tied up at Kinnego marina. They are of all makes, shapes and sizes. He should consider the employment that that place creates, the leisure that it generates and everything that goes with that. We must recognise that Lough Neagh is the second most visited area for tourists in Northern Ireland. We must not lose sight of that. The Chairperson will support my point, because it is in her constituency.

Very important issues are at stake. Many people have given a lot of time and effort to make Lough Neagh and its shores what they are today. It is important that we maintain them. We rely heavily on the Minister to take a common sense approach to all those matters.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you for affording me the time to speak on this topic. It is good to see that the Minister is present. I served on the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee during its early stages, while I was a member of Cookstown District Council. Like any organisation, there were wee glitches at

the beginning in getting it established, motivated and going. However, we represented the wildfowling, boating, tourist, and government interests represented by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). Dredging, local government and other interests all came together, essentially to work in the best interests of the great natural resource of Lough Neagh.

I was born, brought up and live on the shores of Lough Neagh. We have one of the greatest resources in these islands; it is underutilised, under-resourced and not properly tapped into, and that is very sad. However, we had put in place a mechanism, which was starting to pull together and to represent that college of interests, and to co-operate in the best interests of the local community. We worked with EHS to improve the biodiversity of the lough; with local community groups, schools, and the like, which engaged with one another to learn about the lough and its great richness; and, principally, with local councils to try to realise the tourism potential of the lough. I will return to that point, because some false economies are under discussion.

In six years, the committee secured over £4.5 million for project work and attracted, or helped to attract, at least another £4.5 million to the area. It has been directly responsible for delivering projects worth over £500,000, and helped to deliver 26 other projects for which other partners took the lead.

2.45 pm

The committee helped to secure £120,000 for projects to be delivered over the next two years, and there are further live applications for an extra £300,000. It provided strategic responses to over 110 relevant Government consultations and 87 significant planning applications. It also conducted awareness exercises and conferences on a range of issues, such as erosion alleviation and whooper swan monitoring. That is the range of matters wherein that committee, with input from local people and interest groups, has it in its grasp to help.

As a local person, I do not recognise or realise the sense of withdrawing funding from that group. The potential of Lough Neagh is grossly under-realised, so why withdraw the funding? I heard George Robinson referring to cutbacks in various places. Mr Savage suggested that a visit to Kinnego may be appropriate. People should visit Ballyronan on the shores of Lough Neagh

and the Battery harbour to see how people use those resources. A wide range of community groups and boating interests are located there.

That brings me to my point about a false economy. At a time when everybody knows that people are cutting back on their holidays abroad, who oh why do we remove one of the key crutches helping our local economy to develop? It really does not stack up. It is a false economy. Why remove that potential to help to develop Lough Neagh in times of depression and difficulty? If people are staying at home, let us help them to stay at home. Let us develop our resource. We are not talking about a huge investment. We see what it has helped to realise, and I referred earlier to the sum of £9 million. It just does not make sense.

Let us keep the spending at home. Let us realise the full potential of that spending, and, in doing so, let us develop one of the greatest natural resources in these islands.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots):

My Department and I consider the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees, over their lifetimes, to have met fully the objectives that were set for them by the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture in 1994. The advisory committees have performed their roles with diligence and expertise, supported by a very small but committed secretariat. Today's debate should not be seen to tarnish the record that they have demonstrated over that period.

The question that has to be resolved today is whether there remains sufficient support from the councils that border Lough Neagh and the River Bann for the advisory committees to remain effective, or whether, in light of the changes that will be introduced following the review of public administration in 2011, a rethink is required to ensure that the development and management of those two strategically important water bodies is co-ordinated properly.

My officials first became aware of the district councils' doubts about the continued funding of the two advisory committees when they were invited to a meeting in the offices of Magherafelt District Council on 25 February 2009, at which representatives of all nine councils were in attendance. Speaking to me recently, Graham Seymour, my director of natural heritage in NIEA, described the views that were expressed at that meeting as a bolt from the blue. It is

worth pointing out that in his letter responding to the points that were made at the meeting, Mr Seymour refuted the claims that were made by some that a plethora of groups was involved in the management of Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann. However, he also warned that in the event of insufficient assurances from the councils to continue the funding of the advisory committees, it would fall upon NIEA and DCAL to determine their future.

Subsequent to that meeting and the Department's response, the two advisory committees were invited to review their roles and effectiveness and to justify their continuation. In a letter dated 27 April 2009 to the two chairmen, it was again pointed out that there was no certainty regarding funding beyond 31 March 2010. The report of the two advisory committees was considered at a special meeting of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann management committee on 10 August. The management committee comprises representatives of the statutory and executive bodies with responsibilities that affect the two water bodies.

At that meeting, a proposition was made by one council to continue with the current structure for a further 12 months. None of the council officials present was sufficiently confident to commit beyond the review of public administration.

On 13 August 2009, NIEA wrote to all nine councils, seeking confirmation that they would continue to fund the two advisory committees until 31 March 2011. In response, two councils confirmed funding for 2009-2010 and 2010-11; three councils indicated that they would make no further contributions; two councils indicated that their funding would be dependent on all other councils contributing; and two councils had not made a decision by the end of October 2009. They have since joined two other councils by indicating that their funding would be dependent on the other councils' contributions.

NIEA was faced with what can be described only as a lukewarm response from the councils, so it decided, albeit reluctantly, that it could no longer continue its funding. On 9 November 2009, it advised the councils accordingly. It appeared that the structure was no longer sustainable.

I am satisfied that NIEA is not in a position to make up the shortfall resulting from the withdrawal of support from other co-funders. It is worth pointing out that, to my knowledge, that decision has not prompted a change of heart by the

councils. Only one council has since written formally to the Department. Apparently untroubled by the irony of its own funding decision of March 2009, Ballymoney Borough Council wrote to me seeking a reversal of the NIEA decision.

It is important to see that NIEA decision in a wider context. The Department's natural heritage grant programme supports a wide range of environmental bodies. That programme does not remain static from one year to the next. Changing priorities mean that funding is apportioned differently. I am sure that the same can be said for councils and the bodies that they support. I am aware that some arm twisting may go on between members of the advisory committees and the councils that have been less than enthusiastic about continuing their funding. Like it or not, councils have made it clear that they are not wholly convinced about the merits of the current structure. Given the pressures on the Department's budget in the coming year, I cannot ignore that message.

We must also take into account whether it is in anyone's interest to have a management structure that is weakened by the absence of key local authorities to the point at which it becomes little more than a talking shop. However, I recognise the strategic importance of Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann, and I will invite the councils and other public bodies to bring forward proposals for any new structures that would serve the interests of all users of those bodies of water and be sustainable beyond the review of public administration.

Importantly, in the interim, I am prepared to continue funding the two advisory committees for a further year on the basis that each constituent council also contributes. I notice that Mr Beggs, for example, indicated that we should go ahead and fund it anyway. There will be no freeloaders in this situation. The Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees have done good work that significantly benefits councils in those areas. There is no room for freeloaders. We need all the councils involved to get on board. If they do not, NIEA funding will not be available nor, in any event, will funding from four of the councils.

In case Mr Beggs does not know, I tell him that I will not roll over; I do not do that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that I suggested that the Department should be proactive by considering a revised budget, which

it could then try to sell to the other councils? The Minister is reading into my speech something that I did not say.

The Minister of the Environment: I am happy to revise the budget, but I was satisfied with it as it existed. I do not believe that £5,000 will significantly put out any council. However, I will not be pushed around by any particular council. We must stand up and say that there are significant benefits for each constituent council. They must dip their hands into their pockets to produce the modest amount of money that they need to gain those benefits.

Mr Dallat indicated that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has withdrawn its funding. DCAL is in exactly the same position as my Department, and I have confirmed with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that if the councils step up to the mark, DCAL will continue to fund the two bodies. Therefore, apart from three councils — a Member said that that number is down to one, but that has yet to be confirmed to us, so, as far as the Department is concerned, it is still three councils — we are all around the table, and DCAL and DOE will step up to the mark.

Mr Savage invited me to visit Kinnego marina. My first engagement as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure was to visit Kinnego, and I have visited it on many occasions in a private capacity, so I am well aware of the generous facilities at the site.

We wish to move forward with the two advisory committees so that they can continue to carry out the work and assume the responsibilities that they have done for many years. I implore the relevant councils to come with us and to continue to provide funding up to the end of the review of public administration period. At that point, we will identify the best way to continue delivering quality support services for those waterways. In the meantime, I ask the councils to give us their support so that we can continue to do the job. I am in total agreement with the Member who tabled the motion and with the other Members who said that the advisory committees are worth supporting. In spite of the difficult financial circumstances in which my Department finds itself, it will continue its funding, with the proviso that everyone else steps up to the mark.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that Question Time begins at 3.00 pm, I suggest that the House

take its ease. The debate will continue after the statement from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Cathal Boylan, winding up the debate.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

DSD and Housing Executive Land

1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Social Development if she has completed her report into land use within her Department and the Housing Executive. (AQO 737/10)

The Minister for Social Development

(Ms Ritchie): I am not certain what report the Member is referring to, but I can confirm that my Department and the Housing Executive have been looking at the extensive land bank already in our joint ownership. The Member may be referring to the Savills report, which was a major stock condition survey of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's housing stock. Savills found that the Housing Executive's housing stock was very well maintained. It also pointed to the fact that the Housing Executive land bank could be reduced with the effect of boosted capital receipts and lower estate management costs. The housing budget suffered a £200 million loss from 2009-2010 to 2010-11 as a result of the collapse of the land and property market. It is not that anyone is specifically to blame; it is simply a fact that I have to deal with. Therefore, given the scarce resources available to me, I am keen to see what else I can do to make those limited funds go further.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I appreciate that property values have fallen over the past couple of years, but does the Minister have a sense of urgency around land belonging to the Housing Executive and her Department being used to lever in, and produce, more newbuild social housing? That is a big priority for us all, but particularly for the Minister, to ensure that the waiting lists of several years can be reduced.

The Minister for Social Development: The Member points to what we are doing to make the best possible use of our resources. Some years ago, we did not actively pursue building houses on our own land. However, when I assumed the position of Minister for Social

Development, I instructed my officials, the Housing Executive and housing associations to ensure that we built more houses on land that we owned to enable more money to be put into construction rather than into land acquisition and costs.

Last year, when I was presented with the social housing development plan for this year, 17% of the programme was devoted to transition sites. I said that that was not good enough. Therefore, on my instruction, officials took another look at it. When they came back, we were able to ensure that 34% of the programme would be built on our own land, and the same will apply for next year and the following year. Therefore, more efforts have been made during my time in the Department for Social Development (DSD) than have been made previously with respect to building on our own land and making the best use of available resources to ensure that money is put to the best possible use for those who are in urgent need and are on the waiting list.

Mr Shannon: I will be the first Member during Question Time to congratulate the Minister on her elevation to the position of party leader. I am sure that many other Members will join in those congratulations shortly.

The Minister mentioned the Housing Executive's substantial land bank. Does she intend to consider opportunities in which one, two or three dwellings could be built? Sometimes that is not always feasible, but if there were half a dozen land banks in a town, such as Newtownards, for example, would the Minister consider giving opportunities to housing associations to build on smaller portions of land to accommodate one, two or three dwellings as a way of addressing the problem of elderly people and families on the waiting list?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his kind remarks.

Mr Kennedy: He voted for you.

The Minister for Social Development: He must have re-designated.

When I announced the new housing agenda in February 2008, I indicated that I wished to pursue every possible option and innovative means for housing provision. My Department will examine every possible option. The bottom line is that there must be best value for money. I want quality housing that meets housing need.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister comment on land at Ballymacoss in Lisburn? Lisburn City Council, of which I am a member, made that land available for social development. That was worthwhile. However, owing to delays in her Department's processes, there was considerable loss of revenue and value to the council, through no fault of its own. The Minister has written to the council to express her regret. Will she do anything further?

The Minister for Social Development: I am well aware of that issue. Some months ago, I met a delegation from Lisburn City Council to discuss Ballymacoss. The bottom line is that I want a significant proportion of the new housing development programme to be provided on that site.

When I took up office, I wrote to all district and borough councils in Northern Ireland to find out their available land banks. Lisburn City Council kindly got back to me at that stage and mentioned Ballymacoss. As I said in my letter, I regret that there was considerable delay in dealing with that matter. From various correspondence that I have received from the chairperson of the council's corporate services committee, I understand that we will be able to resolve all of those issues and, ultimately, be able to provide social houses in Lisburn.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell the House what efforts are being made to build a higher proportion of the social newbuild programme on land that is already publicly owned?

The Minister for Social Development: Members may be interested to know that, since becoming Minister, I have built around 300 homes each year on land that is already publicly owned. In 2011, that will increase further — to upwards of 1,000 homes — subject to planning approval.

Considering that, in the year before I took up office, only 96 homes were built on publicly owned land, Members will, from those figures, see evidence that I have been active in making the best use of resources that are available to me. That is one reason why, in 2010, my Department will start to build more new homes than in any year during the past decade.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you will appreciate that both Mr Shannon and Mr Butler, in common with Mr Burns, raised similar issues in their supplementary questions. The bottom line is that I am determined to provide the best possible housing resources with the limited

money that is available to me. That is good use of public money.

Ross Road Flats and Ross Cottages

2. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development why she is maintaining Ross Road flats and Ross Cottages despite the detrimental impact these dwellings are having on residents in the Falls area. (AQO 738/10)

The Minister for Social Development: I have visited the lower Falls area, and I am acutely aware of the problems that are faced by residents and the local community. There are a total of 20 properties in that area: 12 flats, two houses, and six cottages. All except three are currently occupied. Those homes are just over 30 years old. The Housing Executive has maintained them well during those years, although I accept that further work is now needed at those properties. I understand that the Housing Executive is already in discussions with residents and the local community on how work can be taken forward.

The underlying problem is not the flats themselves, but the actions of people who come into the area and engage in antisocial behaviour and serious criminality. It is primarily a community safety issue, which the wider community must work to address, alongside elected representatives and relevant statutory agencies.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister told the House that she has visited the lower Falls on a number of occasions. However, has she ever visited the Ross Road flats and Ross Cottages? I do not believe that she has. Is she willing to meet local representatives, political representatives and residents' groups in that area? It is important to point out that the flats are the focus of antisocial behaviour in the community. Many residents in the community are calling for the demolition of the flats. I urge the Minister to ensure that they are demolished.

The Minister for Social Development: There is no single or simple answer to the Member's question. A wide range of issues will always have to be taken into consideration. I want to increase the housing stock, not reduce it. Paul Maskey asked me whether I would visit the Ross Road flats. I await the revised proposals from the Housing Executive, and I will be happy to meet the residents after I have considered

those. Within the past month, I met some of the residents on two separate occasions. I met several of them at Conway Mill and at the official opening of St Peter's Immaculata youth club. On each occasion, I said that I would be happy to meet them at some future stage to discuss their concerns.

Members must be clear that the answer to the problem is not demolition. I am surprised that the Member who chairs the Public Accounts Committee should ask such a question and advocate the demolition of millions of pounds worth of housing in an area of acute housing stress, in which the average waiting time to be rehoused is approximately 18 months. That does not make sense to me on a human or financial level. I am committed to providing more housing for people rather than reducing what is available. Suffice it to say, I have spoken to the residents. In fact, I have spoken to them on three separate occasions, because some of them attended my Department's public meeting at the Radisson Hotel last September. On that occasion, they presented me with a petition, which I gratefully received.

Mrs M Bradley: What criteria would have to be satisfied for the demolition of publicly owned housing assets to be appropriate?

The Minister for Social Development: I want to increase, not reduce, housing stock, and I will accept demolition only as a last resort. I will not recommend demolition in areas of high housing need when the houses are habitable. Generally speaking, demolition is appropriate when houses are in such poor condition that refurbishment is an uneconomic or impractical solution.

Girdwood Barracks Site

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the regeneration of the Girdwood Barracks site, including the possibility of social housing provision. (AQO 739/10)

The Minister for Social Development: The proposals for the Girdwood site are being developed as part of a wider regeneration master plan, which includes the former Crumlin Road jail. Following public consultations on the proposals contained in the draft master plan, a revised option has been developed to try to address a number of community concerns, including the provision of housing. I understand that the provision of housing on the Girdwood

site remains contentious, but I am acutely aware of the housing crisis that exists in north Belfast. In the absence of other suitable development sites in the area, the Girdwood site presents an opportunity to provide housing. Therefore, it is my intention to bring forward the development of much needed housing on the site. Accordingly, I have instructed the Housing Executive to appoint a housing association to begin working on the development of 200 social houses on the site.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I congratulate her on taking that welcome step, which will relieve substantial housing stress in north Belfast. Will the proposed development of social housing at the Girdwood site be of assistance in tackling other housing need in north Belfast?

The Minister for Social Development: Members will be aware of the number of potential redevelopment areas in north Belfast. Alban Maginness brought me to the long streets and Parkside on several occasions to demonstrate the need for redevelopment in those areas. My Department is working on Queen Victoria Gardens, the long streets and Parkside. Work on the options for each area is almost finalised, and I expect to be able to make decisions in the coming weeks. Members will be aware from previous Assembly debates that redevelopment activity is likely to displace many families. With housing demand in north Belfast already significant, I do not want to add to the number of people in housing stress across the community.

That is why I am so keen to see the potential of Girdwood realised at the earliest possible opportunity. Not only can Girdwood assist in tackling our other housing priorities across north Belfast, it could tackle the waiting lists for those already in need of housing and act as a catalyst for the wider regeneration of that area, with the obvious benefits that that would bring to the wider community.

3.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: The Minister recognised the sensitivities around the Girdwood Barracks site. Does she agree that the economic regeneration potential of the site is the foremost priority and, therefore, if the benefits that that is to bring are to be maximised, not just for that part of Belfast but for the whole of the city, consultation and agreement with the wider local community is essential?

The Minister for Social Development: Mr Hamilton referred to economic regeneration. I am concerned with all aspects of regeneration in north Belfast. However, the foremost reason for me was the high levels of housing stress in north Belfast that require to be addressed urgently. I have been consulting with the community and the MLAs in north Belfast about the master plan for that area since I became Minister for Social Development. The bottom line is that there needs to be final agreement on the overall master plan so that we can provide a better future for the people of north Belfast. That is why I took the immediate decision to address the particular issue of housing.

As the result of consultation, all master-planning options and equality exercises have shown the inevitability of housing on the site. Therefore, it would be remiss of me not to commence that work in anticipation of subsequent Executive approval of plans for the overall development of the site. Not only do we require housing, we require jobs and training opportunities. However, my first priority is to provide housing to address the housing stress in north Belfast.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If, indeed, 200 homes are to be built in Girdwood, it is a welcome development.

Has the equality impact assessment on the draft master plan for Girdwood been completed? I want to touch on one of the issues that Simon Hamilton raised about the rest of the regeneration. If those 200 social houses appear, it will be an important boost to the construction industry in that area. What procurement steps has the Minister taken with the housing associations for that much needed contract?

The Minister for Social Development: In relation to the second part of her question, I assure the Member that I have instructed the Housing Executive to begin immediate discussions with a housing association about the provision of houses on that site. As soon as I have further details, I will come back to Mr Maginness, Ms Ní Chuilín and the other MLAs in north Belfast on that.

As the Member is aware, public consultation on the draft master plan for the site and on the subsequent equality impact assessment (EQIA) highlighted the fact that housing is extremely contentious but much needed. The consultation on the EQIA confirmed the need for social housing in the nationalist community in north Belfast, and it also confirmed the concerns of

the unionist community that housing on the Girdwood Park site would impact on community relations in the area. Therefore, the results from the EQIA consultation were factored into a revised master plan option, which proposed a series of compromises on the contentious issues. I considered the revised option, and it was presented to the junior Ministers at a meeting on 13 December 2009. The main concerns at that meeting were housing and the publication of the EQIA. The next stage for me is to discuss the new proposal with all the MLAs for North Belfast. I hope to hold those discussions shortly, and I have cleared the further stage of the EQIA today.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister assure the House that she remains committed to building shared social housing on the Girdwood Barracks site, and that she will not allow politicised abuse of shared future considerations to deflect her from doing so?

The Minister for Social Development: I said previously in the House, specifically when I launched the new housing agenda, that I want shared housing to be built on the Girdwood Barracks site. However, if that is not possible, I will allow building to proceed, as I have an obligation to address the social housing needs in that community. The social housing waiting list in north Belfast is very high, and it must be tackled if we are to urgently address the need for housing in that area.

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

4. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the mortgage relief scheme. (AQO 740/10)

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also congratulate the Minister on her new role.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mrs McGill for her offer of congratulations.

I launched the new housing agenda in February 2008. In it, I stated that I would develop proposals for a mortgage rescue scheme, and that work was duly completed. I made an initial bid of £5 million to fund the mortgage rescue scheme in the June 2008 monitoring round, and I have made bids at subsequent monitoring rounds to enable a scheme to be introduced. However, to date, none of those bids has been met. Unfortunately, I do not have the funding to

allow me to launch the financial rescue element of a mortgage scheme.

I will not raise the expectations of those who are struggling to stay on the housing ladder when I do not have the budget to provide the type of financial assistance that is required. However, I will continue to make bids in future monitoring rounds to enable me to launch the financial rescue element of the mortgage rescue scheme.

Mrs McGill raised the issue of the mortgage rescue scheme with me in the course of several Question Times during the past year. Although the final quarterly figures for the past year have yet to be published, it appears that the number of actions for repossession almost doubled between 2007 and 2009. That indicates the need for a full mortgage rescue scheme and demonstrates the level and depth of the recession that we are experiencing.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Minister for her response. She made the point that she does not want to raise expectations, but perhaps those expectations have already been raised.

The Minister also talked about the rising number of repossessions. Does that level of repossessions mean that the mortgage scheme has failed? The Minister said that she has made several bids but has been unable to get the money required for the scheme. Is the scheme now defunct?

The Minister for Social Development: I ensured that the work on the scheme was carried out. I made all the bids for the actual mortgage rescue scheme and those bids were not met by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

The Department has continued to monitor the uptake and level of advice sought since the launch of the pilot mortgage debt and advice service, and, considering the amount of financial resources that have been invested in it, that scheme has been quite successful. In its first six months of operation, the service assisted 373 people and prevented repossession for 29 clients who would otherwise have found themselves homeless. The results of evaluation will inform assumptions on the potential demand for a financial mortgage rescue scheme. So far, it looks like the extra money for specialist debt advice that has been provided by the Housing Rights Service is bringing benefit to a great number of those who are experiencing financial difficulties.

I urge the Member to ask her ministerial colleagues around the Executive table to support any further bids that I make for the mortgage rescue scheme.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Points of order will not be taken during Question Time.

Mr Kennedy: I congratulate the Minister on her recent election as leader of the SDLP. Has she established from Minister Wilson why that long-standing bid has never been met?

The Minister for Social Development: I cannot read the mind of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, but I urge DUP Members to ensure that future bids for the mortgage rescue scheme will be met, because that will go a considerable distance to help to alleviate the great levels of housing stress that are felt by those who cannot meet their mortgage commitments.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The situation is deeply concerning for the families that are affected. It must be a concern for the Minister and her Department that the number of families that action is being taken against has doubled. It is a concern for all of us who deal with constituents who find themselves in difficult circumstances. The Minister has been provided with limited resources for specialist advice for such people. What is the impact of that? How many people have been helped by such specialist advice? Has the value of that advice been assessed?

The Minister for Social Development: In May 2009, I provided funding to launch a pilot mortgage debt advice service to increase the level of advice for people who were experiencing difficulty in making mortgage payments. That pilot service will run for 12 months and is due to conclude in May 2010. The pilot will be fully evaluated at the end of that period, and the results will inform assumptions such as the extent of the repossession problem in Northern Ireland and the potential demand for a financial mortgage rescue scheme.

My officials continue to monitor the uptake and level of advice sought since the launch of the mortgage debt advice service. In the service's first six months of operation, it has assisted some 373 people and prevented repossession for 29

clients. The results of the evaluation programme will inform assumptions on the potential demand for a mortgage rescue scheme. I am sure that the Member will agree that it seems that the additional money for the specialist debt advice provided by the Housing Rights Service is benefiting many people who are experiencing financial difficulty. The Member, like other Members and me, knows many constituents who have encountered unforeseen financial difficulties due to the economic recession. Therefore, we need to be charged to address their problems.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Employment and Support Allowance

6. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the time taken to process employment and support allowance claims. (AQO 742/10)

The Minister for Social Development: The latest figure available for the time taken to process a claim for employment and support allowance is 19·2 days; that was the average time taken to process claims between April 2009 and December 2009. That figure compares favourably with the former incapacity benefit target of 22 days, and it demonstrates the continuous improvements achieved by the employment and support allowance centre since the start of 2009, when clearance times were more than 23 days.

The latest available figures show an average processing time of 16·6 days during December 2009, which was an excellent performance. I invite Members, as I did at my last Question Time and during debates on the issue, to take up the invitation extended by the Social Security Agency to visit the employment and support allowance centre at James House in the Gasworks complex to see for themselves the good work that goes on there.

That would also give Members an opportunity to talk directly to staff about any constituency or policy issues that they may have encountered.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time to the Minister for Social Development. I ask that Members take their ease until there is a change in the Chair.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are all sitting in expectation of a statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, yet we do not have a copy of that statement. Is there not something wrong with that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr McCarthy, for raising that point of order. It will be up to the Ministers to explain why copies of their statement are not available.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Ministerial Statement

Outcome of the Agreement at Hillsborough Castle

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Under Standing Order 18A(5), a period of questions on a ministerial statement may last no longer than one hour. I am sure that Members from across the House will consider that to be grossly inadequate, given the importance of the statement that is to be made today. Mr Speaker, I know that the SDLP Whip raised that issue with you at the Business Committee. What is your opinion on the adequacy of that Standing Order? The SDLP will seek to amend that Standing Order through the Committee on Procedures in due course.

Mr Speaker: I understand that, undoubtedly, there will be considerable interest in the statement. The Member is correct to say that the SDLP Whip raised the matter at the Business Committee today. However, Standing Order 12(7) is clear that motions relating to the business of the House shall be taken at the start of business and certainly after notice. The term “after notice” has been ruled to mean appearing on the Order Paper, and, as I already said to the Business Committee, it is not possible to move a motion for suspension of Standing Orders without its being on the Order Paper. That was made absolutely clear at the Business Committee. I refer Members to Standing Order 12(7).

I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a joint statement. Following the statement, questions will be answered alternately by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. However, Members should note that I shall call only one Minister to answer each question.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The deputy First Minister and I wish to make a statement on the agreement that was reached last Friday at Hillsborough Castle. I will deal with the devolution of policing and justice powers and the establishment of a working group to identify proposals to improve Executive functioning and delivery. The deputy First Minister will outline our agreed approach to parading, including

finding local solutions to contentious parades, and addressing outstanding Executive and St Andrews issues.

This agreement is the result of an extensive negotiation to resolve a number of significant outstanding issues, the first of which is the devolution of policing and justice responsibilities. The agreement on policing and justice devolution builds on decisions that the deputy First Minister and I had taken previously, notably in our statement of November 2008, and on solid work by the Assembly, in particular by its Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

The Assembly has already passed legislation that will facilitate the establishment of a Department of justice and has set out the procedure for the appointment of a justice Minister. The agreement reached last Friday sets a timescale for the achievement of devolution. A process of community consultation will be undertaken over the next few weeks. On 9 March, the deputy First Minister and I intend to table jointly a motion requesting that a broad range of policing and justice responsibilities cease to be reserved and are devolved to the Assembly. It will be for the Secretary of State to lay an Order in Council at Westminster to effect that. The Government will set out publicly a parliamentary schedule for taking forward the necessary transfer Orders to implement that devolution. The transfer of responsibilities should take effect on 12 April. From that day, the Assembly will have responsibility for the broad range of policing and justice powers that previously fell under Westminster control.

The model for the new Department of justice and the method for appointing its Minister has already been the subject of extensive debate in the Assembly and consideration by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Last year, the Assembly passed a Department of Justice Bill that sets out the method for appointing a Minister. That method requires a cross-community vote in the Assembly to elect a justice Minister, following a nomination by any Member. In due course, that process will be initiated here in the Chamber.

Today, we met party leaders to consider applications of interest for the new ministerial post. The purpose of the meeting was to allow us to identify the candidate who, we believe, is best able to command cross-community support when the election takes place. Given the stated

position of the parties, it has not yet been possible to identify an appropriate candidate. A new justice Minister will be elected on the Floor of the Assembly when powers have been transferred on 12 April.

The Hillsborough Castle Agreement sets out two principles that will be essential for the operation of the devolved policing and justice responsibilities. The first is the independence of the judiciary, which underpins the rule of law in all modern democracies. We re-emphasise our commitment to that principle in the agreement. The second principle that is restated in the agreement is the Chief Constable's operational responsibility, free from partisan or political interest, for directing and controlling the police within a framework of policies and objectives that are set by the Policing Board and the Department of justice.

The agreement looks forward to the work of the future Department of justice. It commits to an addendum in the existing Programme for Government that reflects the extended responsibilities that will devolve to the Assembly and the Executive. The new Minister will draft the addendum to the Programme for Government and bring it to the Assembly for approval. The addendum will set out a programme of work for the new Department and will also demonstrate how that will mesh with the work of other Departments. The agreement offers an indicative list of policies that might usefully be included in the addendum. That sets a challenging agenda for the new Department — one that supports effective policing, avoids delay in the criminal justice process, aims to rehabilitate offenders and protects the interests of victims and witnesses.

The agreement makes it clear that the new Minister of justice will be a full member of the Executive: he or she will have the same standing as other Ministers when attending and voting at the Executive. He or she will have operational responsibility for matters in the Department of justice, which will be subject to his or her direction and control. From time to time, the justice Minister will have to take quasi-judicial decisions. In line with best practice, we are agreed that those shall be made by the justice Minister without recourse to the Executive.

The agreement also enables the Minister to bring proposals to the Executive on how the ministerial code and related procedural

guidance might be amended to ensure effective decision-making on urgent, confidential or other matters within his or her responsibilities that might, under current arrangements, require Executive consideration. Any amendment to the ministerial code will require Executive and Assembly approval, and we expect any new agreed arrangements to be in place by the summer recess. In any event, cross-cutting issues, legislative proposals and financial allocations to the justice Department will still require Executive consideration.

We believe that the arrangements in the agreement on the devolution of policing and justice represent an effective basis on which to move quickly to the assumption of those new responsibilities.

It has also been recognised for some time that the successful implementation of devolved policing and justice responsibilities is dependent on an adequate level of resourcing. That was the motivation for our prolonged engagement with the Prime Minister last autumn, to ensure that identifiable shortfalls in the current levels of funding were rectified. The outcomes of our negotiations with the Prime Minister were set out in his letter published on 21 October 2009. The generosity of that offer, especially at a time of financial restraint, was widely acknowledged, and that offer has been repeated in full in the text of the agreement.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State repeatedly made it clear that the additional funds offered in that package were dependent on the successful devolution of policing and justice responsibilities. If the Assembly votes on a cross-community basis on 9 March to request devolution, and if the other essential steps are taken to achieve actual devolution on 12 April, our policing and justice agencies will have access to that additional level of funding over the coming years. That will contribute considerably to the success of the new responsibilities that will devolve to the Assembly and the Executive.

The effectiveness of the Executive in delivering positive outcomes for the community, and, in particular, how that could be improved, was an important theme of discussion at the talks. As we have indicated in the agreement, parties have put forward their ideas, and we wish to facilitate and to continue that work by establishing a working group to consider all

proposals for arrangements that would improve the functioning of the Executive and their ability to deliver. As Members are aware, we have proposed that the leaders of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP should co-chair the working group, and we will be discussing that further with them. Following that, we will seek the Executive's agreement on the establishment of a working group, which we hope can start its work by the end of the month. We hope to have Executive endorsement of that approach by the end of the week.

I commend the agreement to the Assembly and to the wider community.

The deputy First Minister (Mr McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Agreement at Hillsborough Castle is evidence of our commitment to resolve the issues around parading, including finding local solutions to contentious parades. As part of that, we have established a process to develop a new and improved framework for dealing with parades. That framework will be fashioned by all stakeholders and will maximise cross-community support. For the first stage of that process, we have agreed to set up a co-chaired working group comprising six members. The membership of the group was announced last night. The group had its first meeting earlier today and will complete its work within the next two weeks.

We recognise the importance of support from all sides of the community, and that support will be vital in creating a new, improved framework for the management and regulation of public assemblies, including parades and related protests.

We believe that an effective framework should be built on a number of key principles. First, no two situations are the same and, therefore, no solution can be imposed. It is our view that local people are best placed to provide local solutions. Secondly, we must respect the rights of the people who parade and the people who live in areas affected by parades, acknowledging that, at times, those rights may be at odds. The new framework will recognise that everyone has the right to be free from sectarian harassment. Transparency, openness and fairness must permeate all aspects of the framework, and total independence will ensure the credibility of the decision-making process.

The interim report of the Strategic Review of Parading will provide the basis on which the

working group will take forward its deliberations. The report will also inform the public consultation, which is scheduled to take place between March and June. The five key areas that the working group has been tasked to consider include procedures relating to the receipt and notification of parades and assemblies, and objections relating to those; the facilitation of dialogue and mediation, and, in the event of the failure of mediation, recourse to independent adjudications and procedures; adjudication arrangements; a legally enforceable code of conduct; and the right of citizens to freedom from all forms of harassment. That list is not exhaustive, and the working group, by agreement, may add to it. We will promote and support all the agreed outcomes of the working group.

3.45 pm

A number of core principles will underpin the improved regulatory framework. In the first instance, we recognise that the framework must be capable of maximising cross-community support. However, we are mindful that we need also to promote resolution to ongoing parading issues while the work of the working group and the legislative process are continuing. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that the appropriate support mechanisms are in place.

With that in mind, support will be provided to help local communities and those who parade to find local solutions to contentious parades and related protests. That will encourage local accommodation and will take account of lessons to be learned from successful local models.

The involvement of all key stakeholders is intrinsic to the resolution of contentious parades. With that in mind, we are keen to promote and to support direct dialogue with representatives from the Loyal Orders, band parade organisers, local residents' groups and other stakeholders, because that work is advanced. We will also encourage the participation of locally elected representatives in the process of resolution.

The current adjudication mechanism of the Parades Commission will continue until the new, improved arrangements are in place. It is our intention that a draft Bill will be completed for consultation by late March. The consultation process will run until early June. We will introduce a Bill to the Assembly in September. We intend to support all necessary steps in the Assembly to ensure that the Bill completes all

its stages before the end of 2010. We will also take all the necessary steps to enable the reclassification of parades as a transferred matter.

The agreement also provides for the junior Ministers to chair a working group to identify all Executive papers and decisions that are pending. The aim of that exercise will be to make recommendations to the Executive on all those outstanding issues on which it may be possible to make progress and to explain how that might be achieved. We intend for that work to be completed by the end of this month.

Finally, the agreement commits us to bringing forward a report to the Executive by the end of this month, detailing the level of progress made on the outstanding matters arising from the St Andrews Agreement. The junior Ministers will also chair a working group to bring forward recommendations by the end of March on how progress can be made on those outstanding issues, following which we will agree a programme for the implementation of agreed conclusions.

I commend the agreement to the Assembly and to the wider community.

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 as the Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee. I will ask further questions from my party political perspective.

Will the First Minister confirm what role he envisages for my Committee in the working group that has been established to bring forward agreed outcomes for a new and improved framework for parades?

Speaking from my party political perspective, I would like to know whether the First Minister will provide to the House today a comprehensive list of the outstanding issues from St Andrews, which were referred to in section 5 of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. What does he think would constitute an agreement on parades? Have the First Minister or his party colleagues had any discussions with Ministers or officials from Her Majesty's Government, including the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, on the possible reintroduction of suspension legislation for the Assembly? Will he confirm whether he has shared the identity of

his secret device with the deputy First Minister or his party colleagues?

The First Minister: In answer to the question that Mr Kennedy asked as the Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee, the deputy First Minister and I talked earlier today and agreed that it would be appropriate for us to meet the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee to consider how best we could interact with them as part of the process, particularly with regard to the work that they will want to do on parading. There are almost two parallel processes that we could usefully draw together. That might be beneficial and could save some time.

As far as identifying a list of outstanding issues from the St Andrews Agreement is concerned, I thought that we had just agreed to set up a working group to do precisely that. There are a number of issues from St Andrews that my party and I regard as outstanding. Some matters in the St Andrews Agreement were not implemented, and others were not faithfully implemented; there are distinctions between those two. Therefore, the working group, on which Mr Kennedy's party will have a member if it takes up that position, will identify the issues, consider the extent of that commitment, determine what progress has been made on issues, consider what further progress can be made and report to the Executive.

As far as suspension legislation is concerned, I am glad to say that it never entered my mind to ask Her Majesty's Government about the reintroduction of suspension legislation for the Assembly. I want the Assembly to run smoothly, and I hope that the Member feels the same. Perhaps we should be moving forward in a more positive vein.

I know that you like answers to be short, Mr Speaker. However, I do not think that I will be able to be so when answering the next question. Therefore, I rely on your legendary and acknowledged patience as I respond to the issue about the secret device.

Everybody has recognised that there are methods available, particularly to the two main parties in the Assembly, which can be used at any and all times to bring down institutions, to ensure that things do not work and to act as vetoes. It is well recognised that a leader of the Ulster Unionist Party once wrote out his post-dated resignation and eventually caused

a suspension of the Assembly, and it was reported in the newspapers that the deputy First Minister was prepared to resign. Had he done so, we would have unquestionably ended up with something worse than the suspension of the Assembly. The Assembly would probably have collapsed. I, too, have the ability to do exactly the same things if I feel that there is bad faith on the part of the signatories to the agreement.

At Hillsborough, the Prime Minister indicated that he will act as a guarantor for the agreement and its faithful implementation. However, there must be a time during any negotiating process when you look across the table at the person with whom you are negotiating and you make a determination as to whether you believe that that person will seriously keep the commitments that they are entering into. Quite frankly, if you do not believe that that person will do so, you should walk away from the table and have nothing to do with it. I have entered into this agreement on the basis that my party and I will meet all our commitments, and I expect that Sinn Féin will meet all its commitments in the agreement as well. It is on that basis that I believe that the Assembly and the community should be looking forward. I will have the other agreements in my back pocket: it is a case of trust and verify all the way. However, if that is what we must rely on, there is little hope for this Assembly.

Over the past months, I have had plenty of drama in my life. I could have walked away very easily. Every brain cell and every blood cell cried out to me to watch from the sidelines rather than from the front line. I am here because of a sense of duty, because I believe that what we are doing actually matters and that what we are trying to achieve in this Assembly is for the betterment of all the people of Northern Ireland. It is so that young people, such as those in the Public Gallery, will be able to enjoy a future not like the past that many of us had to go through. If other Members in the Assembly do not collectively agree with that, we would all, quite frankly, be far better packing our bags and going home.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Moutray: Is the deputy First Minister confident that new parading legislation can and will be delivered this year?

The deputy First Minister: Yes. I am supremely confident that the legislation can be delivered. I am also supremely confident that the transfer of policing and justice powers will happen

on 12 April. I agree with the First Minister, although I am not sure that the word “clever” can be applied to a scenario that would see the dismantling of the institutions.

It is much better to move forward in a positive vein than to look on the black side. In the couple of days since the agreement was announced on Friday past, it has been interesting to see some media outlets doing their damndest to unpick the agreements that were made. They have done their damndest to drag Members on to their radio programmes, for example, in order to put the negative side of things to them so that the community who watched with considerable hope and optimism as we made the Agreement at Hillsborough Castle would continue to be disillusioned.

I travel with hope and optimism; I look on the bright side. When my party makes commitments, it is absolutely dedicated to keeping them. It is true that, having moved into the scenario that we are in, and in dealing with the very difficult issues that we face — whether the history of the past 800 years or the past 40 years — in order to make the progress that we need to make, we need to move forward with courage and decisiveness and with no fear of those who are opposed to the power-sharing, the North/South or the east-west institutions that were agreed between our parties in recent times.

I will move forward to make this place and its institutions work. The institutions need to work if we are to deliver a better future for our children and our grandchildren, and if we are to tackle the difficulties that ordinary citizens face as a result of the recession: people losing their jobs, elderly people living in fear, and families and children in poverty. Those are evils that the Assembly and the Executive have to tackle.

I am absolutely committed to playing my part, and I am absolutely committed to working in harmony with the First Minister to ensure that we deliver for the people who sent us to this place.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist áirithe agam don Chéad Aire.

Will the First Minister confirm that the working group on Executive functioning will be mindful of the safeguards that were developed in the Good Friday Agreement and in the St Andrews Agreement?

The First Minister: I hope that the group that will deal with Executive functioning will be under the co-chairmanship of the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and the leader of the SDLP. I congratulate the new leader of the SDLP on taking up her new and extended duties. I assure her that the deputy First Minister and I will be happy to work with her as she moves forward in the leadership of her party.

The working group will conform to all our rules and practices. However, the practices that it will not conform to are those that, I believe, have caused the delay in many of the decisions that we have taken. All the parties that submitted papers during the talks process demonstrated that there was a remarkable degree of overlap in the methods that they could use to make the Executive function and to deliver better. All of us, working as a collective Executive, rather than having a Government and an opposition in the Executive, can move forward with better structures and better arrangements to get better delivery for the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Ritchie: Paragraph 2 of the introduction to the Hillsborough text states:

"We wish to see this agreement reflect our willingness to ensure the Executive and the Assembly reflect better this spirit of partnership, mutual respect and equality which remain vital for the success of devolution."

How does the First Minister square those saccharine words with the distortion of democracy that he has engineered, with Sinn Féin assistance, to deny nationalists a rightful additional Minister at the Executive table?

4.00 pm

The deputy First Minister: There have been a number of debates on that issue in recent times, and I made remarks during those debates that I will now repeat. Every single Member knew from the very beginning of this term of the Assembly that there was no prospect whatsoever of the Democratic Unionist Party agreeing to the transfer of policing and justice powers in the context of the d'Hondt mechanism. We all knew that. It is also abundantly clear — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: It is also abundantly clear that the community, in widely welcoming the transfer of policing and justice powers,

would prefer to see a local Minister in charge of the Department of justice. During the debate, there were suggestions from the SDLP that ignored the DUP position as stated from the beginning of this term of the Assembly.

I was determined during the negotiations to see the transfer of policing and justice powers. However, one thing that I know for certain, for absolute certain, is that there was no prospect whatsoever of the SDLP getting a second Ministry, for the simple reason — *[Interruption.]*

I have all the time in the world, and, like the First Minister, I — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: Like the First Minister, I want to congratulate the new leader of the SDLP — *[Interruption.]*

However, I remind the SDLP that when the First Minister and I had a previous conversation with the leaders of parties in this House, it was made clear at that meeting by the former leader of the SDLP that he wanted to see d'Hondt run again. If d'Hondt had been run again, we can be absolutely certain that the Department of justice would have been taken by a unionist party for the simple reason that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: For the simple reason that the SDLP would have had fourth choice when d'Hondt was run. If I had accepted the arguments made by the SDLP during the course — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: If I had accepted the arguments made by the SDLP during the course of those discussions, one thing is absolutely certain: we would not have had the transfer of policing and justice powers in this term of the Assembly. The other thing that is absolutely certain is that we would have continued to have direct rule Ministers from London lording it over the justice and policing arrangements here in the North of Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: No nationalists need apply.

The deputy First Minister: You can heckle — *[Interruption.]*

Mrs D Kelly: No nationalists need apply.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: You can heckle as much as you like, but we all know that, since Sinn Féin and the DUP became the largest parties in the Assembly, the SDLP and Ulster Unionist Party have developed into the two grumpy parties. *[Interruption.]*

Liz O'Donnell, a former junior Minister in the Department of Foreign Affairs, said when observing from Dublin what was happening in the North — and she expressed her view publicly — that the SDLP and Ulster Unionists were in denial about the election results. That was many years ago. I feel that you are still in denial and still unable to accept — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: You are still unable to accept the changes to the political landscape that have taken place in recent years.

The answer is very clear: for Sinn Féin to have agreed with the SDLP's approach to the debate on the transfer of policing and justice powers would have been to guarantee continuing stewardship of justice and policing in the North by British direct rule Ministers. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Mr David Ford.

Mr Ford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McNarry: Make way for the justice Minister.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me remind the House, especially the Chief Whip of the Ulster Unionist Party, who should know better — he should know how to behave in the House — that I will not tolerate Members speaking from a sedentary position. I will not tolerate that from any Member.

Mr Ford: On behalf of my colleagues, I welcome last Friday's agreement. I also welcome the constructive joint statement that the two Ministers made today as a demonstration of a different way of working and moving forward, and frankly, one that is in sharp contrast to the cheap heckling coming from either side of me at this end of the Chamber.

There is no doubt that the people of Northern Ireland want these institutions to work, and they want politicians to be constructive. They do not want the silly catcalls that are going on. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: Does the First Minister agree that we need more than the words of last Friday and that we need serious actions to demonstrate a different way of working together? Does he agree that the best way to demonstrate that is by serious movement on promoting a shared future for all our people, specifically through the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for welcoming the agreement and the joint statement that was made today. I am sure that he cringed somewhat when, to his right, he heard the leader of the SDLP referring to a cross-community vote in the Assembly as a corruption of democracy. I cannot understand how that term can be used for something that could not have been more democratic in seeking a more widespread support for a way forward or for a Minister.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: He is right to say that people outside the Chamber want our institutions to work and deliver. He is also right in saying that more than words are needed; actions are needed as well. That is why we have set up the three working groups. Their purpose is to nail down the delivery problems that exist in the Executive, to look at the decisions that have not yet been taken, or, where there are difficulties, to see if we can find a pathway through those difficulties.

I am glad to say that there has been wide agreement within OFMDFM as to how the CSI strategy will be taken forward on a policy basis. I do not believe that it will be one of the issues on which we will get stuck. I believe that we can make real progress. I think that we have already shown in the agreement that we have reached a large measure of agreement on the framework for any addendum to the Programme for Government. That is how we should be moving forward, and I hope that we will get encouragement from all sides of the House, no matter what their party affiliation may be.

The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr Spratt): I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I thank the Ministers for their statement, and I acknowledge the First Minister's comments about the work of the Committee.

How do the Ministers envisage the office of the Attorney General will be set up, and at what cost? How do they consider the Attorney General might report to the Assembly? What plans do they have to share with the Committee the paper that John Larkin QC submitted to their office in September 2009?

I ask the Ministers to share with the Committee any views they might have on any or all of the category 2 list of issues that the Committee considers need to be dealt with. Quite a number of those issues were dealt with at the Committee's meeting this morning. I also ask the Ministers to share their views on the overall budget that will transfer from the Northern Ireland Office.

Finally, given the plans for a:

"resolution for a cross-community vote in the Assembly on 9 March"

to ensure that powers are devolved on 12 April 2010 —

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

The Chairperson of the Assembly and

Executive Review Committee: I ask that the Ministers appear at the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, possibly even next week. That request was made at today's Committee meeting, and a letter to that effect is on its way to the Ministers' offices.

The deputy First Minister: The Attorney General will have a range of functions, including legislative and legal functions such as referring the legislative competence of Assembly Bills to the Supreme Court and defending the public interest in civil law matters. He will also have functions in relation to the Director of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), such as appointing the director and arranging for the annual report of the PPS to be laid in the Assembly.

The Attorney General will also have consultative and advisory roles, such as issuing guidance on human rights standards and being consulted on the programme of criminal justice inspections. We intend to invite the Attorney General to be the chief legal adviser to the Executive. The Attorney General will have no role in individual prosecution cases. On the devolution of policing and justice, the Director of the Public Prosecution Service will become solely responsible for all decisions with regard to the prosecution of offences relating to devolved matters.

The Justice Act 2002 provides for the Attorney General to participate in the proceedings of the Assembly to the extent that is permitted by its Standing Orders. It is envisaged that that participation might involve the Attorney General's answering questions on the exercise of his responsibilities in relation to the Public Prosecution Service and the work of his office. The Attorney General will have no voting rights in the Assembly, but he will prepare an annual report on the exercise of his functions. The First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, must lay that report before the Assembly.

We are considering a report that was prepared by John Larkin QC on the establishment of the office of the Attorney General and its potential role. After that, we will make arrangements with the Assembly authorities for the preparation of suitable Standing Orders. The Attorney General and his support office will be funded by OFMDFM, but final decisions have yet to be made on long-term structures. The Assembly will have an opportunity to debate the Estimates and the budget for the office of the Attorney General as part of the budget Bill that is required to support expenditure on policing and justice functions.

As I said, we are still considering the report that was prepared by John Larkin QC on the establishment of the office of the Attorney General. We are aware that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has an interest in that. We intend to share the report, along with our considered views and commentary, with the Committee in due course. We will be more than willing to take up the invitation to appear before the Committee about the important measures.

Mr Spratt referred to the category 2 list of issues. In connection with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's ongoing inquiry on the devolution of policing and justice matters, it identified a list of issues to be addressed. We understand that the Committee has reached a view on several of the major issues, such as the full-time status of the Attorney General post and the judicial appointment arrangements. In other cases, we have taken forward work that has changed the context significantly. Examples of that work include our financial negotiations with the Prime Minister and the conclusions that were reached in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement on parades and the relationship between the justice Minister and the Executive.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. The deputy First Minister said:

"no two situations are the same and, therefore, no solution can be imposed. It is our view that local people are best placed to provide local solutions."

Will the First Minister confirm that his Department will support local communities to arrive at local accommodations in disputes relating to parading?

The First Minister: I can certainly give that assurance. There are two different elements to the resolution of parading issues, the first of which is the generality of parades. A working group is considering how we might have a more transparent, open and fair process. That will be to everyone's benefit and will ensure that everyone knows precisely where he or she stands on parading and protest issues.

4.15 pm

As for those parades that have attracted more contention, either through the parades themselves or the protests that are associated with them, there is a requirement for a greater deal of work, and not just in the week or so before the parade is due to take place. The deputy First Minister and I are totally committed to giving whatever assistance we can to encourage local engagement, dialogue and solutions. Other Assembly Members who have taken an interest in parading issues will want to do the same in their own areas.

Ultimately, the resolution to contentious parades and protests lies in local accommodation. That is why I was involved in the Drumcree issue and attempted to start a dialogue. The Portadown Orangemen showed a willingness to take part; regrettably, the Drumcree residents' group, which had earlier indicated an interest in taking part, has not yet done so. That meeting has not yet taken place. That is the type of issue on which we need, on a year-round basis, to encourage people to resolve such disputes.

It is in all our interests, and those of the Police Service, justice and the finances to deal with policing and justice, that we overcome the problems that we have had with parading over these past years. There will be no want of energy or commitment on the part of the deputy First Minister or myself in giving support to achieve local solutions.

Lord Morrow: The First Minister said:

"On 9 March, the deputy First Minister and I intend to table jointly a motion requesting that a broad range of policing and justice responsibilities cease to be reserved on 12th April, our policing and justice agencies will have access to that additional level of funding over the coming years."

From that point, we will have the devolution of policing and justice.

Does OFMDFM accept that there are other significant dates in the Hillsborough agreement that relate to parading and, in the event that they are not met, policing and justice will not be devolved?

The deputy First Minister: There is no point in regurgitating what I said earlier. I am moving forward in a positive spirit, with a good heart for the agreement and with absolute commitment and determination to make it work.

Mr McNarry: Following on from that very interesting question from Lord Morrow, does the First Minister agree that no one speaks for the Orange Order except the Orange Order? The institution has not been involved in the negotiations on the Hillsborough agreement and it will not comment further until it has studied the agreement in due course. Therefore, in light of the timescale set out in the agreement, will the First Minister wait for the Grand Lodge to give its verdict on the agreement at a time of its own choosing?

The First Minister: As the Member said, no one speaks for the Orange Order except the Orange Order: not me, not him, nor anyone else in this Chamber. Therefore, we will listen to what that institution and the other Loyal Orders have to say on these issues. However, I was encouraged to hear the remarks of the Orange Order, the Royal Black Preceptory and the Apprentice Boys, which indicate a positive outlook and a preparedness to consider seriously the proposals in the Hillsborough agreement.

I want the whole community in Northern Ireland to be able to have a say on the agreement that we reached at Hillsborough. It is essential that we have community confidence in the institutions that would grow as a result of the further devolution of policing and justice powers. That is why we are holding a consultation process. It is essential that we have support from all sections of the community and from all parties in the Assembly as well. As far as I am concerned, the

only way forward is to have that support, both in the community and the Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the First Minister confirm that the chief negotiator for Sinn Féin, namely the deputy First Minister, has, essentially, told the House that no nationalist need apply for the post of justice Minister, and that the devolution of policing and justice will be achieved only if the parades question is resolved?

Will he also confirm that nationalist votes are of less value than unionist votes in this House, and that Sinn Féin has rolled over to DUP demands?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs D Kelly: On the issue, Mr Speaker —

Mr Speaker: I really must insist that the Member comes to her question.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister also confirm that the parades working group is a set-up, and that the Ashdown proposals are the only ones on the table?

The deputy First Minister: I can certainly confirm that if Sinn Féin had accepted the SDLP position in relation to how we deal with this issue, policing and justice powers would reside in the hands of British Government direct rule Ministers for the remaining term of this Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: No nationalist need apply.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: That is the reality. The contention that has been made is absolutely without any foundation whatsoever. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: The confusion that is clearly evident in the SDLP's mind —

Mrs D Kelly: There is no confusion.

The deputy First Minister: Well, we certainly had confusion when the former leader of the SDLP said that he wanted to see d'Hondt being run again, which would have meant the collapsing of a Department and absolute certainty that the justice Department and its responsibilities would have been taken by a unionist Minister. To then have — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I must insist that the deputy First Minister be allowed to answer the

question. I remind Members not to try and speak from a seated position.

The deputy First Minister: The SDLP is obviously afraid to hear, or does not want to hear, the answer. In recent days, we have heard a different position from the SDLP, arguing that it is entitled to a second Ministry. With the full running of d'Hondt, the SDLP would still have the one Ministry that it has at the moment.

I have been informed that it is the intention of the working party, since its meeting this morning, to invite representatives from the other parties to make submissions and to come and see it. *[Interruption.]*

If the Member is not interested in going, that is a matter for her. However, I am reliably informed that all parties in this Assembly will receive an invitation from the working party.

Mrs D Kelly: Very inclusive.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: By dint of the process that we have agreed, it will move forward at different stages of the Committees in this Assembly and will be subject to a cross-community vote in the Assembly on the basis of the legislation.

Mrs D Kelly: A DUP/Sinn Féin vote.

The deputy First Minister: I know that the Member from Upper Bann —

Mrs D Kelly: Portadown.

The deputy First Minister: I know that the Member for Upper Bann does not like to hear the answer and likes to keep interrupting. She has very little manners. With respect, the interjections are taking place because the SDLP arguments have been holed below the waterline. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement. My question has been partly answered, but are there any details of the role of the current Parades Commission as the working group and the new and improved processes roll out?

I am convinced, now more than ever, that the stoops — I mean, the SDLP, is quite happy —

Mrs D Kelly: No stoop —

Mr Speaker: Order. Mrs Kelly, you are coming very close to challenging the authority of the Chair.

The First Minister: The working group on parades will look at the experience of the Parades Commission, which has been appointed for the remainder of this year. The agreement indicates that we will look to a new framework that will take into account the work of the Parades Commission but build on the work that was carried out with the strategic review of parading.

The people on the working group have experience and knowledge of the parades issue. Attending the first meeting of the working group with the deputy First Minister this morning, I saw a determination from them to do their work within the time limits that they set down and to come out with an agreed approach. I believe that that is the way forward. I really cannot understand anyone in this House who would attempt to undermine the working group's efforts. I say again that it is in the interest of the whole community that we find a way through the parades issue, so that we have a better framework and system with more community respect than existing systems.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The functionality of the Executive is a key issue to Members and the people we represent. What importance does the deputy First Minister attach to the work on improving how the Executive function? That is the key question.

The deputy First Minister: If we were all to be honest, we would readily accept that, although there have been great successes for the joint decision-making process at the Executive, an awful lot of our work has left a lot to be desired in terms of forging agreements and moving forward in a way that delivers for our people. That was certainly the case until Hillsborough.

I said all along that securing agreement at Hillsborough would present a new launching pad for the Executive and the Assembly to move forward in a way that delivers for citizens. That is why the establishment of the three working groups is so important. It is an inclusive process. It is an attempt to improve our performance. It is an attempt to deliver for our people. The First Minister and I are absolutely determined to move forward in a spirit of harmony and partnership to ensure

that the citizens who voted us into this place can be rightly proud of the delivery record of the Assembly and the Executive.

The SDLP's fractious contribution to the debate will confuse a lot of people, just as they found the steps taken by the SDLP during the passing of the Department of Justice Bill very confusing. The SDLP consistently voted against that Bill, and then abstained, before voting for it in the final vote. The SDLP must make up its mind.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The deputy First Minister raised an important point. All Members should be aware that the appointment of the justice Minister was decided in the House. There was a vote in the Chamber on how the justice Minister should be appointed — by cross-community vote. The SDLP voted for that Bill. However, my question is: will all outstanding matters from the St Andrews Agreement be implemented?

The First Minister: We have indicated in the Hillsborough agreement that we will identify all the issues outstanding from St Andrews. The text of the St Andrews Agreement had varying levels of commitment to various issues, and, of course, there are varying levels of commitment from political parties to those issues. However, some issues go beyond the St Andrews Agreement and are part of legislation, so they involve legal obligations. Those matters will be identified by the working group, and it will recommend how we might move forward.

Mr Ross: A number of Executive working groups have been established as part of the agreement. How long does the deputy First Minister anticipate those groups taking to complete their work?

4.30 pm

The deputy First Minister: In short, a few weeks.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Ministers for their statement. Will the First Minister indicate what changed in the agreement between last Monday and Friday to buy off the DUP Members who were deeply unhappy with it on Monday and who said that there would be no devolution of policing and justice powers in a political lifetime or in the lifetime of the Assembly?

The First Minister: The Member did not speak to me like that when we were sitting down together in Hatfield House. I am sure that he

wants a common way forward within unionism on those difficult issues.

The real difference was that we did not have agreement on Monday. By the end of the week, we had reached agreed terms. During Monday's discussions, there were gaps in the agreement. We talked about them, and a group that nobody could say was not representative of the party came down to indicate to the press that the party had unanimously been encouraged by the progress that had been made at Hillsborough Castle and that issues that had to be dealt with had been identified. During the week, we dealt with those issues, and, just as we ended up with a unanimous decision on Monday, we ended up with a unanimous decision on Friday.

Mr O'Loan: The deputy First Minister told us that there was no prospect of the SDLP ever getting a second Minister and that he knew that from May 2007. Today, he told us that the devolution of justice and policing powers was conducted on DUP terms and that, from the outset, he capitulated to those terms. I doubt whether they will, but will the First Minister and the deputy First Minister assure Members that the Hillsborough Castle Agreement is the full extent of what has been agreed between them? Furthermore, do they agree that, if parties and people are to make an informed decision about the arrangement, they need to know what is on the table and what is under the table? Do they agree that the lack of detail in the agreement leaves them open to the conclusion that everything is not on the table and that things have been agreed under the table?

The deputy First Minister: With the First Minister's agreement, I confirm that everything that we agreed between us is in the paper that Members received in the aftermath of the Hillsborough agreement. That is the full extent of the agreement between the First Minister and me.

As the Member tries to return to what is a very weak argument, I remind him that, before these institutions were established, we had a shadow meeting in which we agreed what Departments each party would take. In effect, we ran d'Hondt behind the scenes before coming here to do it officially, and, fair play to all the parties, everybody kept their word. However, during that process, both behind the scenes — *[Interruption.]* The Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP were also involved, so Members should not be shaking their heads and saying "That's

interesting" as if they did not know. Maybe they did not know, but I can assure them that all parties were involved.

When d'Hondt was run behind the scenes, the SDLP was entitled to one Department. When it was run in the Assembly, it was entitled to one Department. If it were to be run again tomorrow morning in the Assembly, the SDLP would still be entitled to only one Department.

Ms Purvis: I welcome the agreement that was reached at Hillsborough. I congratulate the First Minister and deputy First Minister on their statement and on their determination to make the Assembly and Executive work to deliver politics for the people of Northern Ireland.

I will ask a two-part question: will either Minister give a bit more detail on the process of community consultation that is mentioned in the Hillsborough agreement? What consideration has been given to, and what mechanism has been chosen for, the appointment of a Committee for justice, and will that Committee include representation from every political persuasion in the Chamber?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for her good wishes as we attempt to move forward. I will take the second question first: the Assembly will be in charge of the structures of the Committee that will be set up to scrutinise the Department of justice. I suspect that the Committee may want to operate under the d'Hondt system; equally, it may want to operate under another system. Perhaps the SDLP will propose an alternative method to d'Hondt under which it could operate. However, it will be entirely up to the Assembly to decide on its structures and how people are appointed to it.

As far as the determination of community confidence is concerned, we had some discussions last night and again today on how we might take that forward. It is likely that we will use some newspapers as an element of the wider community consultation, and we will also consider other, more modern techniques. However, there could be other considerations, including the recognition that stakeholder groups throughout the community will want to have their say on the issue. The Assembly will also want to discuss the issue. Although the community will have an opportunity to have its say at a grass-roots level, we are the elected representatives of that community, and what we say about those issues is important. I will want

to ascertain that all parties in the Assembly are supportive. If we are truly to argue that community confidence exists, the support of all Assembly parties will be necessary.

Mr Hamilton: An important aspect of the devolution of policing and justice is the identification of a candidate for the post of justice Minister. When does the deputy First Minister believe it might be possible to identify a likely Minister?

The deputy First Minister: As many Members know, prior to Christmas, at meetings between the First Minister, me and the leaders of the other parties, we set in train the process of allowing all the parties to consider how we would identify a justice Minister. It is clear to everybody that any Member of the House can be nominated for that position. We had a further meeting this morning, and people have undertaken to consider the situation.

The SDLP is on public record as having nominated Alban Maginness for the position. Other parties have reserved their position at this time, and, out of common courtesy, we must give them space to consider the matter. However, it could well be that we will not know the identity of the justice Minister until we come to the Floor of the Assembly on 12 April 2010, when our task will be to install a Minister with responsibility for that Department. However, a justice Minister could, conceivably, be identified prior to that.

Although this morning's meeting was with all the party leaders collectively, the First Minister and I agreed that we will meet each party leader individually over the next while to discuss that issue and other matters of concern. It is only appropriate that we undertake to have those meetings, and we will see what comes out the other side of them. However, come what may, we are confident that we will be able to emerge from the Assembly sitting on 12 April 2010 with a Minister for justice.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for coming to the Chamber. All that I can say is that the agreement was a long time coming. Thank God that it came. The situation would be worse had there been no agreement at Hillsborough. I commend my Alliance Party colleagues for sticking the pace, as it were. Some colleagues did not stick the pace — *[Interruption.]*

A question is coming for whoever wants to answer it. In respect of parades, the deputy First Minister referred to:

"the facilitation of dialogue and mediation".

Do the First Minister and the deputy First Minister accept that the parading issue is one of good relations, not just of conflicting rights?

The First Minister: The Member is right: there were many hours of negotiations. I believe that someone bothered to count them and there were 120. I make no apology for that whatsoever. Throughout the process, I argued consistently that it was important to get the agreement right, rather than to get it quickly.

For decades upon decades, the two issues that we tackled had escaped resolution from all parties in the Chamber. We have been able to reach agreement on two matters that I do not believe any other parties in the Assembly would have been able to reach. They were not able to reach agreement in the past. The issue of dealing with policing and justice was deemed so outrageous that, during previous talks that I can remember, it did not even make it onto the agenda. The issue was deemed impossible to resolve. Therefore, that achievement is significant, although it took a long time.

Policing, justice and parading have placed a cloud over the community and, indeed, over the Executive during the period that we have existed. The ability to find a way forward on those issues liberates the Executive to deal with other issues, to make progress and to achieve better delivery.

As for parading, there must be recognition of the cultural rights of every section of the community. There must be respect for each other's traditions. Through that, we can all have the right to enjoy our own culture and way of life in a way that offends no one. The issue is about good relations. However, it is also about people being able to talk to each other to find resolutions to disputes and difficulties that exist at present.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the deputy First Minister agree with the characterisation that was given to the accord by the First Minister at Hillsborough, when he said that the deal was made in Ulster and that, therefore, all the people of Northern Ireland or Ulster, however one wants to define it, have won political stability and the opportunity for economic growth that flows from it? With that in mind, will he indicate to the House

whether, in his view, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee will continue to carry out its important scoping functions or whether he envisages a change to the workings of that Committee?

The deputy First Minister: Probably the only disagreement between the Member for North Antrim and me is the definition of Ulster. His Ulster has six counties, and mine has nine. However, that is not a major issue.

I agree absolutely with the sentiment that Ian Paisley Jnr expressed. I have been out and about publicly at all kinds of functions. Indeed, on Saturday night, I was one of thousands of people who watched Derry play Tyrone in a Gaelic football match at Celtic Park. Much to Barry McElduff's sadness, on that occasion, at least, Derry beat Tyrone.

People's mood is upbeat. They are conscious of the Hillsborough agreement's significance. There is recognition that, although we have stuttered along from the institutions' beginnings to the Hillsborough talks, circumstances are now presented, as the First Minister has said, in which the agreement can mean liberation for all of us to move forward and provide proper support and government for the people whom we represent.

4.45 pm

On the day that the agreement was made, I said that it could be the day on which politics finally came of age here in the North. Sinn Féin is absolutely and utterly determined to work with its ministerial colleagues from the unionist tradition and from the SDLP in a spirit of co-operation, harmony and partnership to build a better future for our children and grandchildren.

The agreement has been widely welcomed. The people who argue against what we are trying to do are coming at it from different positions. We respect the positions of those who disagree with us, but I think that there is a danger that they have misread the mood of the people in the streets, towns, villages and cities and the position that they are coming from. Whatever about the controversy around this, in the run-in to the agreement, when people were concerned about whether the institutions were sustainable and whether they would fall, people I met on the streets said that the Assembly had to continue because it provided the only hope for the future. Whatever about their reservations, criticisms and concerns, the last thing that people in the

unionist or nationalist/republican community want to see is the collapse of the institutions that we have agreed over the course of what is undoubtedly one of the most successful peace processes in the world today.

Therefore, it is important that we use the Hillsborough agreement. It could be the most significant agreement that we have made in recent years, if we implement it and allow ourselves to be liberated by it to move onward and upward and to bigger and better things for the people whom we represent, as the First Minister rightly said.

The First Minister and I will be pleased to go along to an Assembly and Executive Review Committee meeting at the convenience of that Committee and subject to diaries being suitable to discuss the implications of the events for the Committee and to discuss what future the Committee has in the context of this work. I have no doubt that the Committee will want to remain in existence over the coming weeks and months. There is still work to do, and we will be glad to make first-hand reports to the Committee.

Mr Beggs: Will the First Minister advise the House what method will be used for the appointment of the justice Minister beyond 2012, or will the Department face an uncertain future? We have been told that there is no deal between the DUP and Sinn Féin and that everything relating to the Hillsborough Castle Agreement is on the table. Have there been side deals done between Her Majesty's Government and the Democratic Unionist Party or with Sinn Féin?

The First Minister: It will be for this House or, should I say, the House that will be elected at the elections in 2011 to determine what should occur after 2012. There is a sunset clause, and the House will have the opportunity to use the same system or a different system. That will be entirely a matter for the new Assembly to decide. There is no doubt that, in doing that, we will learn lessons from the processes as we move forward under these arrangements.

Mr Beggs also asked about side deals. I have heard a lot being said about the Presbyterian Mutual Society and so forth. At a time when we were talking to Government Ministers, particularly the Prime Minister, whose ear we were able to whisper into, our community would have felt that we were not doing our duty if we had not tried to indicate to him that there were issues that were

important to our community. That is not a side deal. There is no attachment between the agreement that we have reached and the Presbyterian Mutual Society issue or any other issue.

We raised other issues, and I hope that the Member's party raised other issues with the Secretary of State and with Ministers. It was right for us to do that, because there are issues to be resolved that affect everybody. The Prime Minister has offered us a date to talk further about the Presbyterian Mutual Society, and I know that the deputy First Minister and I are eager to take it up.

Mr Speaker: I apologise to Members who have not been able to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister a question, but time does not permit it. That ends questions on the ministerial statement.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a previous occasion in the House, the party to my right was referred to as "the Provos" and/or "Provisional Sinn Féin". The matter was referred to you for consideration. I refer you to the unparliamentary reference that Ms Ní Chuilín made to the SDLP, and I ask you to report back to the House on the matter.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member said. I have already made a ruling on this matter in the House. Let me be clear about this: whenever Members name parties, I expect them to name them by their designation. I have always made that ruling. Members should not tag names on to parties. I make it absolutely clear that parties should be recognised in the way in which they are designated in the Chamber. I made that ruling a number of months ago, and I have no problem doing it again.

The House will take its ease for a few seconds before it moves on to the next item of business.

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

Committee Business

Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the social and environmental importance of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann regions and the economic contribution they make through employment, leisure and tourism; acknowledges the significance of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees in maintaining the value of these areas and the risks involved if funding of the advisory committees is withdrawn; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to reinstate Northern Ireland Environment Agency funding as a matter of urgency, and to encourage the other funding partners to continue their financial support. — [The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly).]

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I cannot promise that my winding-up speech will be as exciting as the past hour, but I will do my best.

It is clear from the debate that the work of the advisory committees has been of interest to people across large areas of the North over the past 15 years. I thank those who have taken the time to inform the Committee about the issue.

I want to make it clear what the debate has been about. The Committee is mindful of the financial constraints that face the public sector at all levels, be that central or local government. The debate has not been a call for more money. As the Chairperson made clear in her opening remarks, the Committee's concern focuses on the fact that there was no evidence to suggest that DOE's decision to cut funding was based on an assessment of cost-effectiveness. I use the Department's own words:

"The Advisory Committees have been very successfully delivering far beyond their remit since inception".

We know from evidence that was provided to the Committee that the advisory committees were not given an opportunity to review their budget with a view to reflecting current financial circumstances. The Committee has seen figures

that suggest that the advisory committees could manage on less, certainly in the short term, to allow them to continue their function. In fact, DOE's decision was based purely on the withdrawal of match funding from councils.

It is not for us to speculate on the reasons for those council decisions. However, the Environment Committee is concerned that, during the 15 years of their existence, there has been no independent evaluation of the work of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees. In the absence of such information, it will be difficult for councils to make a decision that is based on anything other than the financial pressures that they are facing, and it will be impossible for the Environment Committee to truly assess the short- and long-term impacts of the Department's decision.

The Chairperson and several Committee members spoke about the potential loss that will result from the disbandment of those committees.

We must be careful about making quick decisions now to meet our difficult financial circumstances, as they could ultimately cost us more in the long run. I note that stakeholder engagement is increasingly becoming a requirement of European legislation, particularly freshwater legislation. Therefore, it would seem unwise to undermine the capacity to deliver stakeholder engagement just as it is becoming essential.

Speaking as a Sinn Féin MLA, I must say to the Minister that no matter how much funding the project costs, it must deliver value for money. During their presentation to the Committee, the representatives of the advisory committees said that they felt they were not getting a fair deal when it came to assessment and guaranteeing value for money. Therefore, I am delighted that the Minister has made a decision on that matter today.

However, the Minister also said that he was willing to provide funding for the advisory committees only if all the councils concerned were on board. I ask him to clarify what the position would be if one council did not agree to provide funding. I am an MLA for Newry and Armagh. I was once a councillor on Armagh City and District Council, and I am aware that councils, as corporate bodies, will ultimately have to make that decision themselves. However, following on from today's debate, Sinn Féin would like to see the development of a

model that will allow local councils to address similar issues in future.

I will now move on to some of the comments made during today's debate. Ian McCrea was the first DUP Member to speak, and he said that advisory committees should remain a central government responsibility. He also said that when the representatives of the advisory committees appeared before the Committee for the Environment, they agreed to work within a lower budget, and he felt that they should have been given the opportunity to do so. I am sure that all Committee members would agree with that point.

Danny Kinahan highlighted a long list of issues that the advisory committees were dealing with and commended them for tackling those issues, a commendation that the Committee would agree with. He also discussed employing consultants, and I agree that there is no point in removing funding from groups and then paying consultants to do the same job.

We will not accuse Mr Ford of starting the debate or mess in the first place by being one of the first members of the advisory committees; he is entitled to have his say on the issue. He recognised the valuable contribution that the advisory committees have made over the years, and he also made the valid points that the functions that they carry out are covered by several different Departments and those Departments must examine those functions. The Committee for the Environment will certainly work with other Committees and Departments in considering those issues.

George Robinson talked about the potential that the advisory committees have to generate revenue. However, he also had some reservations and said that it was for councils, as corporate bodies, to make their own funding decisions, a point that the Committee also recognises.

Roy Beggs talked about Lough Neagh being a source of drinking water and discussed the importance of its biodiversity. Furthermore, he talked about how the advisory committees could pass on their local knowledge and expertise to the Departments. Moreover, he discussed funding and expressed his hope that the Minister could redress that issue today, and, thankfully, the Minister has given a commitment to his future funding of the advisory committees.

Mr Dallat discussed the critical importance of the Lower Bann region. He also raised a valid point that had come to the Committee's attention: which body would be responsible for the work of the advisory committees if they were stood down? During a Committee meeting, departmental officials clearly said that they would not be able to undertake that role.

George Savage discussed the economic benefits of Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann, and I think that he may have invited the entire Chamber to Kinnego marina. Perhaps some Members will take up that invitation. He also encouraged the councils to recognise the work that is undertaken by the advisory committees, and, as I have said, it is up to the councils, as corporate bodies, to make that decision.

Patsy McGlone spoke about the potential to develop tourism in the Lough Neagh area.

5.00 pm

Finally, the Minister said that the record of the advisory committees should not be tarnished. I agree. The Committee understands the valuable work of the advisory committees, but their role should be considered in future. The Minister implored all councillors to work with DOE on that matter.

In conclusion, I thank all Members for their contributions. I am delighted that the Minister has made the decision that he has, and I hope that councillors will work on the matter. However, we need to find a proper long-term solution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the social and environmental importance of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann regions and the economic contribution they make through employment, leisure and tourism; acknowledges the significance of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees in maintaining the value of these areas and the risks involved if funding of the advisory committees is withdrawn; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to reinstate Northern Ireland Environment Agency funding as a matter of urgency, and to encourage the other funding partners to continue their financial support.

Private Members' Business

Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill (NIA 7/09): First Stage

Ms Purvis: I beg to introduce the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill (NIA 7/09), which is a Bill to amend the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 to disqualify members of the Northern Ireland Assembly from being elected, or being, a councillor.

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.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Ulster Canal Project: Importance to the Coleraine and Limavady Council Areas and Beyond

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately 10 minutes. As this is the first occasion that the Assembly will hear from Billy Leonard, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Before embarking on my speech I would first like to refer to my predecessor, Francie Brolly, and pay tribute to his work in the Chamber, the Committees and the general life of the Assembly. My taking over the position as MLA for East Derry was made all the easier because of Francie and his gentlemanly approach to matters. I would like to put on record that even last Friday, when I had an important appointment to attend about the Magilligan ferry, Francie was the gentleman who organised it and attended with me. That should let the House know that his commitment to the community goes on despite his standing down, and I pay tribute to him for that.

I selected for discussion a topic with an east Derry slant, yet, as we know, the reopening of the Ulster canal is a tremendously important issue in many areas, not least the immediate hinterland. Discussions on the Ulster canal project have been ongoing for years. There is some movement on it, but the reopening of the entire waterway that is known as the Ulster canal is the key to the Coleraine to Limerick waterway vision for Ireland: an accessible and beautiful waterway vision for the entire island. There has been a long-term campaign, but now is the time to begin making that aspiration a reality.

For those in the House and beyond who recoil from every new project because of the recession, I will make one core point: there will be life after the recession. In fact, the 2008 report produced for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) on the issue was still

confident about that. It referred to the upturn, the fact that it was a seven-year project, and the potential for long-term growth. We must look beyond the recession on this important topic. In practical terms, the Dublin Administration are living up to their €34 million commitment for the section leading to Clones. We should live up to our £9 million commitment and move on one more part of the project. That action would send a declaration of intent to everyone that the project is doable.

The people who have acted as long-suffering lobbyists for the project speak of the need to prepare funding streams now. The vital point is that we do not have to wait until the recession is over. They make the good and serious point that, given that more of the big money will be available after the suction effect of the London Olympics, the funding streams should be prepared now. Let us not park the issue in the long-term car park of fiscal straitjackets, but let us look at the vision of the potential Ulster canal project.

That potential is all about the improvement of the tourism product. In an earlier debate, the fact that tourism is one of the few potential growth areas was referred to. Home tourism was mentioned, through which people are encouraged not to travel abroad but to take their breaks in Ireland. It is also about the improvement of towns and villages along the rivers and loughs that would be linked by the successful completion of the Ulster canal project.

An important point that is perhaps difficult to tabulate is that it would result in an improvement in the confidence of the communities around the waterways that would be linked up. I do not make that point on the basis of a theoretical aspiration. We know already what the work from the Shannon up to the Erne has meant to communities along those waterways. It would be the same if the Ulster canal were linked up and a gateway established from Coleraine to Limerick.

In early December 2009, I had the privilege of visiting Ballinamore, one of the small towns in lovely Leitrim that benefited from other work on the other linking canals. Even in early December, it was obvious that that small town had received a great lift from the activity around the canal and the waterways, and the potential for more was obviously there.

Let us imagine the linking of Limerick to Coleraine, the linking of sea to river and of river to sea. People could sail from around different parts of Ireland, and people could arrive in Ireland from

Scotland and further away, and make their way through a major part of Ireland via a linked and beautiful waterway.

The linkage could allow leisure activities, such as sailing, walking and other on-shore pursuits that would cluster around the waterways, and the waterways would have many other sustainable uses. That would have great consequences for job opportunities, spin-off activities and business for everyone in East Derry, not only for the people in the towns and villages along the Bann. The entire constituency would benefit directly. In addition, if common sense were to prevail so that little soldiers stopped playing war games in Magilligan and other institutions were done away with, a beautiful vista could be opened up for the entire north coast, from Donegal across Derry to Antrim.

I purposely included the word “beyond” in the title of the Adjournment topic because, obviously, the Ulster canal is not a single-constituency project. It is a national project, and I regard it as an important gem in the Irish nation. Others will see it as an all-island, all-Ireland or cross-border project, and some might even see it as an Ulster project. So be it, but whatever one’s aspiration and whatever classification one gives it, it is genuinely a win-win project.

It is a project that requires vision and a driver. DCAL is meant to be the driver for this institution, along with Waterways Ireland as a linked body. I regret to say that many people who have worked on the project for many years feel that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and his Department are not sufficiently behind the vision of the Ulster canal project.

The Minister has said that he had too many commitments to meet one of the main groups. Yet, that group was able to get appointments with the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment. Those Ministers were not too busy to see the group.

I wish to use this debate to strongly urge the Minister — it is good that he is here this evening — and his officials to buy into the vision and to become the driver for that work. Of course, there are other stakeholders, but this is not rocket science. Suggestions on the way forward were made in the 2008 report, and we seek an update today on whether and how those are being pursued. It is not necessary for me to go into, articulate and rehearse all the reports, consultants’ information and stakeholder

groups’ contributions on the issue, because the main kernel now is whether we have a driver for the project.

If the will is there to work with the appropriate people to drive that forward, we could start claiming that that vision was part of DCAL’s role and that of the Assembly. If the will is there, we could drive that forward as a flagship project — even an iconic one. There are groups that would be willing to support the project, if we put it on that pedestal, and that is why we should be planning for that now. If the will was there, the marketability of Ireland would move up not just one rung but several, because we would have a major and brilliant attraction. We must remember that the Ulster canal is a tourism product not only for visitors but for all the people of Ireland: North, South, east and west.

It is not my intention to quote facts and figures but to draw out two main points from my presentation. First, that this doable project should not be put on the back burner. Secondly, that DCAL needs to take on board and enter into the spirit of driving it as a doable project. I am glad for the opportunity to raise the issue in the Assembly this evening, but I hope that it will not be an issue that gets plenty of air but little resuscitation. We cannot let the Ulster canal project fester. We need to be able to prepare the way to finally deliver that project for the benefit of east Derry, the north coast, Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Monaghan and the rest of Ireland. I look forward to the contributions of other Members and, in particular, that of the Minister.

Mr G Robinson: Following on from the earlier debate, I reiterate that I fully recognise the potential benefit of the Ulster canal project for the tourist and leisure industry in the Coleraine and Limavady areas. I am also fully aware that, at this time, the Assembly must concentrate on providing its core functions and be careful when considering the use of additional expenditure.

Much excellent work has been done by the Ulster canal project, and I am delighted to acknowledge the positive legacy that that will leave. It is good that we have such strong foundations to build on in the future and that we have a vision that we can aim for. I am sure that the idea of sailing from Portstewart to Limerick is appealing to many, but we cannot get away from the basic problem of funding. I fully acknowledge and accept that developing natural tourist resources is an important part of building

Northern Ireland's local economies, especially in the Coleraine and Limavady areas, which have lost so many jobs in recent years. However, aiding development must be done with careful consideration of the impact that that will have on the Assembly's overall finances. Although I welcome planning for the future — that is what this debate is all about — I cannot justify spending money that would be better spent on alleviating the shortage of public sector housing, improving the Roe Valley ambulance service, attracting high-quality jobs to the area or helping to train people who need new skills to get back into employment.

Developments that have taken place, such as the Portneal Lodge in Kilrea and the provision of additional fishing stages, have proven to be beneficial. Those were developed at a time when the Budget was not under the extreme pressures that it is today because of the financial crisis. That said, I realise that those facilities have to be maintained and kept to a reasonable standard. I will be the first to seek and support the development of this natural asset. However, I will do so when the economy is, hopefully, much stronger.

5.15 pm

Mr Dallat: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Adjournment debate. The Ulster canal project is, in reality, a vision for the future. As was said, boats from the River Shannon will be able to come north, through Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann, before making their way out to sea or continue their journeys to Derry and beyond, perhaps even to Scotland or its islands. Such a journey would be retracing that of the O'Cahans, the MacSweeneys, the O'Donnells, the MacDonnells, the McQuillans and many others. History would repeat itself, albeit a little bit before the Plantation.

The Ulster canal project will attract long-term investment to build hotels, boatyards, marinas and a host of other river-based projects that will generate thousands of well-paid, sustainable jobs, many of which will be locally based. I am aware of that thanks to the findings of a conference organised by the SDLP a couple of years ago, at which the major players were brought together to discuss the future of the Ulster canal project. It was clear then that much still had to be done to ensure that the project would remain on course and would deliver that which those who inspired it believed it could.

Earlier, we debated the future of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees, which were threatened with closure. That tells me that there is a lack of understanding of the importance of the Ulster canal project and the impact that there could be when the entire canal is eventually reopened in the next few years. That will happen only if we believe in ourselves, have a vision for the future and convince investors that it is a project worth investing in. In recent years, investors were badly nipped by the short-term prospect of gains in the building industry, and many are now looking to long-term sustainable projects. That is where the future of the Ulster canal lies. The Minister is nodding his head in agreement.

Unfortunately, the Lower Bann is still seen by government as a major drainage system, with no Department having overall control of the development of that great river and its huge potential for tourism and leisure, which could rival the River Shannon for excellence.

In recent correspondence with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I was told that the Rivers Agency can only intervene in riverbank erosion if there is a threat of flooding. That was an honest reply. Waterways Ireland has a remit to provide jetties along rivers at strategic points and to organise a few water-based activities. However, its remit is for nothing major or substantial and falls far short of what it wants to do. That is frustrating for Waterways Ireland, which is a cross-border body with a vision for all six rivers that it is responsible for in Ireland.

Hopefully, Minister, funding for the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees has been secured and there is now a better understanding of the need for a body with an overarching view, to make certain that the Lower Bann retains all the elements and protection necessary to ensure that future development is carried out in a balanced way, that biodiversity is central to all plans and that commercial exploitation is managed in a way that maximises potential but does not ruin the river. That was a major point that emerged from the conference to which I referred earlier.

At this stage, we can safely say that the Ulster canal project is no longer a dream, because substantial work has been done on the southern side. The project will become a reality sooner rather than later, provided that we have the vision to recognise its potential. We must bring

together the major players and investors, sit down with them and create an overall plan, particularly for the Lower Bann. We must transform the Lower Bann from a giant drainage system into a paradise that will bring prosperity not only to Coleraine and Limavady but to the smaller towns through which her waterways pass. It would be a mistake to sit back until the final stage of the project has been completed.

Mr Robinson referred to Portneal Lodge, and I am proud and pleased to have been the chairman of the local enterprise group that built it. The lodge makes a substantial contribution to the development of the river as well as providing other tourist-based activities. It would be remiss of me not to mention Portglenone's excellent marina facilities. I hope that I have helped to illustrate the benefits of investment to the smaller rural towns through which the river meanders.

We must protect the riverbanks that were mentioned in the earlier debate. A serious problem exists in the Lower Bann, as the Minister of the Environment kindly acknowledged in his response to that debate. Tourism-related projects are important, but I understand that the River Bann is the only place that welcomes jet skis and that they are banned in other European countries. That hurts me greatly, because that is the very opposite of the type of activity that is needed to ensure that the river is in first-class shape to welcome people not only from other parts of Ireland but, I hope, from other parts of the world.

People already question the wisdom of exposing their pale skin to excessive sunlight. Many more people now know about the risks of melanoma and other skin cancers. The attraction of cheap flights to other European countries will diminish rapidly, one reason being that they are not cheap any more. When that day comes, many more people will discover the pleasures to be had in our own country. An increasing number of people already choose water-based activities.

That day will come sooner rather than later. I base that statement on evidence that I gleaned during recent visits to Lough Erne, where people have made substantial inroads in creating jobs from the types of activity that the River Bann can offer. Again, all of that requires vision, a new approach to tourism and a reappraisal of the need to invest heavily in tourist infrastructure. In the past, we relied on a few weeks of good sun and, in the distant past, the bucket and spade.

We neglected to invest in the infrastructure around the north coast.

It is important to set out a vision for the future. In the Coleraine area, I envisage at least five hotels being built from where the Salmon Leap used to be to the Barmouth. I foresee the creation of many more facilities, because I believe in the project and have spoken to people involved in the development of the Shannon and Erne regions. I know that it will happen, but the Assembly must be a driving force. When investors see the activities of the Assembly starting to roll, I have no doubt that they will invest the same amount of money in the Lower Bann as they invested and lost in apartments.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

(Mr McCausland): I am grateful to Members for their wide-ranging contributions. I am grateful to John Dallat for his historical tour; he took us back to the eleventh century, when the O'Cahans drove the Danes out of Ireland and eventually settled in Scotland. I am also grateful to Mr Leonard for his geographical tour, which took us well away from the Ulster canal to Magilligan and Donegal. There is great tourism potential there. I am delighted that the folk in Moville suggested that the town is associated with the family of Field Marshal Montgomery and his father, Bishop Montgomery, who signed the Ulster covenant in 1912. I welcome the great opportunity to turn those ideas into tourism products. The debate has been historically and geographically wide-ranging.

I will return to the subject. Our debate should have been about the importance of the Ulster canal project to the Coleraine and Limavady council areas and beyond. In considering the matter, it is important to note the existing works that have been undertaken on the Lower Bann navigation, the work to reopen a section of the Ulster canal, its wider strategic significance in the context of Northern Ireland's inland waterways network and the associated costs and benefits.

I will outline the significant investment that has already been made in the navigations of the Lower Bann. Waterways Ireland is responsible for the management, maintenance, development and restoration of the operational navigable waterways throughout Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, principally those for recreational purposes. In Northern Ireland, that responsibility applies to the Lower Bann navigation and the

Erne system. More than £2.3 million of capital works have been carried out on the Lower Bann since 2000, including 580 m of additional public moorings.

The number of boat passages recorded at five locks along the Lower Bann has increased by more than 74% since 2001 at the Cutts, Carnroe, Movannagher, Portna and Toome; from 1,070 in 2001 to 1,858 in 2009. In fact, the increase between 2008 and 2009 was 18%. However, we must recognise that, at some point, the cost of investing in a navigational infrastructure on the Lower Bann must be linked to a proportionate economic return. Thanks to our investment in the Lower Bann to date, the standard of infrastructure has improved greatly in recent times, and that stretch of water is now well prepared to cater for increased river usage.

Waterways Ireland also has responsibility for conducting appropriate studies and appraisals on the possible restoration of the Ulster canal. In light of the outcome of those studies and appraisals and with the authority of the North/South Ministerial Council, Waterways Ireland can be responsible under its statutory remit for the restoration of the Ulster canal and, following restoration, for its management, maintenance and development, principally for recreational purposes.

In that context, studies and appraisals have been carried out in recent years to examine the costs and potential benefits of reopening the 45-mile stretch of the Ulster canal which starts in Northern Ireland. About half its route is in Northern Ireland. The latest socio-economic report indicated that reopening is technically feasible at an estimated £125 million at 2006 prices. That figure should bring some realism to our discussion because, on the basis of a 50:50 split, Northern Ireland's share of that cost is approximately £62.5 million. Despite extensive and expensive studies, it is regrettable that the economic benefits remain unproven. However, that is an essential requirement before we can decide if the project can proceed in its entirety.

The Irish Government have identified the Ulster canal as one of their strategic priorities for agreement in joint projects with Northern Ireland. The restoration was an agenda item at meetings between my Department and its counterpart in Dublin, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, as well at British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference meetings.

5.30 pm

During its meeting in inland waterways sectoral format on 17 October 2007, the North/South Ministerial Council approved Waterways Ireland's proposals to take forward the restoration of the 12-kilometre Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal over the next six years. The total estimated cost of those restoration works is €35 million or £24 million at 2006 prices. The full capital cost is to be met by the Exchequer in the Irish Republic, with subsequent recurrent costs to be shared between the two jurisdictions. It is important to emphasise that that decision did not confer any commitment on either jurisdiction to fund further restoration of the Ulster canal, but both Administrations will keep that under review.

The current position on the work being undertaken on the Clones to Upper Lough Erne restoration project is that Waterways Ireland is on target to submit planning applications in summer 2010 for approval to allow land acquisition and then to proceed towards awarding of contracts for the construction phase, to commence in 2011 with completion scheduled for 2013. Work on the environmental impact assessment and the strategic environmental assessment is progressing well. The environmental impact assessment is due for completion in July 2010.

The work that is under way represents a significant investment in the waterways and will provide an excellent opportunity for my Department to assess the economic, social and wider potential that the reopening of the waterways offers. In considering the proposals, I recognise the potential strategic and cross-border significance of reopening the Ulster canal in its entirety. That would re-establish an extensive North/South navigable network, linking Coleraine and the Lower Bann navigation with Enniskillen, Limerick and Dublin via existing operational waterways.

There is further potential to consider the wider strategic importance of linking all our now-disbanded waterways. The Ulster canal to Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann would open up our northern shores to the extensive Shannon-Erne waterway. The Lagan navigation would link Belfast to the Lower Bann and the Shannon. There is also the Newry canal and other smaller waterways. Those are significant and costly works that we must consider carefully in these

constrained financial times — unless, that is, John Dallat can convince the Minister for Social Development to generously give of the amounts that have gone to her Department to put towards those projects. Perhaps Mr Leonard could convince the Minister of Education that it would be in her best interests to divert money to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I can assure both Members that my Department would be glad and happy recipients of any of that money. I am sure that Mr McElduff, as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, would be openly and avidly delighted to receive that money.

I will return to the subject at hand. As part of its remit to promote and develop the recreational or navigational potential of waterways, my Department continues to assess the scope for further development opportunities, ideally in partnership with other key stakeholders such as local authorities. To that end, my Department recently commissioned a completed business case to assess the viability of establishing a navigation authority for Lough Neagh, the River Blackwater and the upper River Bann. The total capital cost of full implementation was estimated at £6.7 million. That would have increased DCAL's contribution to Waterways Ireland's North/South resource budget from the current 15% share to 24%. Reluctantly, I have had to conclude that, under current Northern Ireland budgetary constraints and priorities, the capital and resource implications of implementation are currently unaffordable.

My Department is also funding a business case assessment of the viability of restoring the 10-mile lower Lagan canal linking Belfast and Lisburn. That assessment is due for completion in March 2010. It will need to prove value for money, and we must also consider affordability. The assessment will also provide a basis for seeking and potentially securing partnership funding.

The collective total capital cost of restoring navigation on the Ulster canal, at £125 million, and the Lagan canal, at £50 million, as well as establishing a navigation authority for Lough Neagh at £7 million, with the commensurate infrastructure improvements, amounts to an estimated £182 million, as well as involving significant year-on-year recurrent costs. Those are significant costs, given the current financial climate. Against that background, I have to conclude that we should wait to see

the outcomes from the completion of works in 2013 on restoring the 12 km section of the Ulster canal between Clones and Upper Lough Erne. With the benefit of that experience, we will be better placed to establish and assess the benefits of undertaking further significant project works as a basis for evaluating the strategic worth of committing to future canal restoration projects.

Adjourned at 5.35 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Department of Justice Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Department of Justice Bill has received Royal Assent. The Department of Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 12 February 2010.

Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 12 February 2010.

Assembly Business

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the start of proceedings last Tuesday, I raised a point of order in relation to the return to office of the First Minister. Have you made a judgment on that point of order, and, if so, are you in a position to advise the Assembly of your view?

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member has said. I have written to him this morning setting out my thoughts on the issue. I am happy to deliberate further on the issue if the Member would like to come and talk to me about it outside the Chamber.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I await receipt of the letter and will consider the matter. I have no issue or difficulty in coming to speak with you about it. However, subject to that, there was public interest in the matter, there was an issue of parliamentary authority, and there was a question about the terms on which a Minister who was appointed by the Assembly had temporarily stepped down and then returned to office. I submit that the matter should have been brought to the attention of the Assembly generally.

Mr Speaker: As I said to the Member when he raised the issue in three points of order, I am not sure that it is always helpful to raise such issues in that way.

I have heard what the Member has said on the issue over the last number of days, including his quoting of Erskine May. I ask the Member to wait for the letter that I have sent to him and then come and talk to me about the issue that seems to concern him deeply.

Executive Committee Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel
(Mr S Wilson):** I beg to move

*That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended
for 15 February 2010.*

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

*That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended
for 15 February 2010.*

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

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Spring Supplementary Estimates: Supply Resolution for the 2010-11 Vote on Account

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

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for this debate. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will have up to one hour to allocate, at his direction, between proposing the motion and making a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel
(Mr S Wilson):** I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £13,772,054,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,567,071,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2009-10 that was laid before the Assembly on 8 February 2010.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £6,197,971,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman

for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2011 and that resources, not exceeding £6,662,114,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2011 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2010-11 document that was laid before the Assembly on 8 February 2010. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

There is a rather uncomplicated motion in my name this morning. I hope that there will be a bit more enthusiasm for supporting it than there was for the motion to suspend Standing Orders. There is probably about £1 billion worth of expenditure for every Member present in the Chamber at the moment. Nevertheless, as I will explain further, it is an important motion for the Assembly to debate.

A take-note debate on the review of 2010-11 spending plans took place in the Assembly on 9 February 2010. The emphasis of that debate was on planning for the future and for 2010-11 in particular. Today, the Assembly's main focus is on setting final spending limits for the current financial year and on providing Departments and other public bodies with the legislative authority to finalise expenditure in 2009-2010. The first Supply resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the Executive's final spending plans for 2009-2010. The second resolution requests interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2010-11 in the form of a Vote on Account. I request the levels of Supply set out in the resolutions under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make recommendations to the Assembly leading to cash appropriations from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

The amounts that I ask the House to vote in Supply are substantial: over £13 billion of cash and over £15 billion of resources in 2009-2010. Those figures bring home the extent of the public services that are delivered by Departments and other public bodies

across Northern Ireland. Perhaps, sometimes, Members lose sight of the bigger picture and all the good public services that are delivered day and daily in Northern Ireland, while we debate, at great length, the additional allocations in monitoring rounds and budgets. Let us not lose sight of the effective public services delivered in health, education, agriculture, roads, transport, social development, culture and the environment on an ongoing daily basis. As Finance Minister, I always expect those services to be delivered efficiently on behalf of the taxpayer, and I will continue to press that at every opportunity.

I turn now to the spring Supplementary Estimates that are before us today. I will refer to them as SSEs, so that I do not have to go through that mouthful, which appears fairly regularly in this speech, every time. I remind Members that these SSEs reflect all in-year departmental changes made since the Main Estimates were approved by the Assembly last June. I also remind Members that the SSEs include the annually managed expenditure — AME — as well as the departmental expenditure limits — DEL. I love all this jargon: we have SSEs, AME and DEL. As I continue, it will all become clearer to Members.

I recognise that, during the Budget debates and the monitoring rounds, the focus is on the assigned DEL, over which the House has full discretion regarding allocation of spend. However, we must not forget that the Northern Ireland Budget also includes over £8 billion of AME for demand-led services, such as social security benefits paid out regularly. In that context, the SSEs reflect the DEL changes agreed at the June, September and December monitoring rounds, as well as the AME changes agreed since the approval of the 2009-2010 Main Estimates last year.

In the three monitoring rounds so far this financial year, a total of £90 million of current expenditure reduced requirements, including the strategic stocktake easements, have been surrendered by Departments. I must take a moment to comment on how this much-reduced figure compares to this stage in previous years. My predecessor stood at this Dispatch Box this time last year and announced a figure of £134.6 million in reduced requirements at the SSE stage. My Rt Hon friend, the first Finance Minister, Peter Robinson, announced reduced requirements of £176 million when presenting the 2007-08 SSEs. So, the £90 million of

current reduced requirements declared so far in 2009-2010 represent a reduction of one third on this time last year and almost half of the 2007-08 reduced requirements.

With respect to capital investment, reduced requirements of almost £80 million were declared by Departments in the first nine months of the current financial year, and that compares with £135 million at this stage in the previous year and £197 million at this stage in 2007-08. That is a 40% reduction on this time last year and a 60% reduction on the 2007-08 capital investment reduced requirements.

What does that actually mean? Does it show that the situation is getting worse? It does not. It indicates that Departments have made very positive achievements. Instead of giving back money for programmes that they promised to carry out but failed to, fewer reduced requirements mean that they are spending money on what they promised to spend it on at the beginning of the year. I am sure that Members will join me today in commending Departments on their much improved financial management. That is progress, and it is a signal that they are delivering on their programmes and services that were planned for the second year of the Executive's Budget 2008-2011.

12.15 pm

I turn to the pressures that emerged during 2009-2010. During the first three monitoring rounds of this financial year, we were able to meet some £126 million of current and £137 million of capital pressures in Departments. Allocations of £20 million in capital in the June monitoring round and a further £5 million in the December monitoring round were made to the Department for Social Development (DSD) for renovation grants and disabled adaptations to social housing. Members right across the Assembly drew those issues to my attention when the easements came. When we had money, we agreed those allocations because we were mindful of the benefits to the people who received the grants and had those adaptations made to their home as well as to the construction sector during the economic recession.

Almost £175 million was allocated to the Department for Regional Development to meet the loss of income that resulted from the Executive's decision in November 2008 to defer the introduction of water charging for a further year, and £15 million of capital was allocated

to DRD for roads structural maintenance in December. Again, we were mindful of the spin-off that that would have for the construction industry at a difficult time.

A capital allocation of £2.7 million was made to the Department of the Environment for the full implementation of the e-PIC planning project. That should make it easier to trace planning applications, and it should make planning applications in general a bit more efficient and easier to handle.

Although one would not think it sometimes, an allocation of £15 million was made to the Department of Health under its first call on available resources, which was agreed as part of the Budget for 2008-2011. In addition, the Executive met the requests for additional funding by the Health Minister to facilitate his preparations for swine flu, including, in the December monitoring round, almost £1 million towards the vaccination of children under five.

Funding of £22.3 million was provided for an extremely important Bombardier CSeries project, with its resultant impact on jobs and investment in Northern Ireland. That is further evidence that the Executive place economic growth at the top of their priority list. There was funding for integrated development fund projects, including education initiatives in west Belfast and the greater Shankill area, and the centre of excellence in intelligence systems projects in the north-west. Furthermore, allocations of £3 million current and £3 million capital were made for this Assembly.

Members must not forget that, as well as additional allocations in the monitoring rounds, provision is made in the SSEs for approximately £2.1 billion of social security benefits and income support in 2009-2010, which, of course, is absolutely necessary to support families and people in Northern Ireland in these difficult economic times.

Before leaving the detail of the SSEs, I inform the House that some additional headroom has been built into the Estimates over and above the December monitoring position. I will endeavour to explain to the House the rationale for such action in order to pre-empt any misunderstanding by Members, which may, in turn, result in futile debate or erroneous headlines later. As a result of the agreement of the Executive in November to a proposal to resolve all of the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claims, provision

has been made in the 2009-2010 SSEs for the implementation of that settlement, subject to progress in the work that is under way. It is essential that that be included in the SSEs and the related Budget Bill. If it were not, Departments would not have the authority to fund any final settlement and, therefore, would incur excess votes. That is a position that Departments would find intolerable, and one in which I do not want to place them.

In the preparation of the SSEs, which are the final statutory ceiling on spending plans in the Budget Bill, I also thought it prudent to include headroom of around £25 million to provide the Executive with flexibility in making allocations in the February monitoring round but only if the resources become available. The SSEs also include a few technical adjustments that will be processed in the February monitoring round. Those adjustments do not give additional spending power to the Executive. I emphasise that such headroom has been included on strict conditions, one of which is that resources that are allocated in the February monitoring round must be used only for the agreed purpose: virement approval to cover excess spending in any other areas will not be given later. In other words, spending must be to the agreed budget. Departments have also been clearly advised that the inclusion of headroom is not an indication that the Executive will allocate additional resources in the February monitoring round. I am sure that Members will appreciate the wisdom of that course of action, and, if such prudent action were not to be taken, Members would, quite rightly, accuse me of short-sightedness and inflexibility, which, as they of course know, would be totally unjustified.

During the preparation of SSEs, three Departments recognised the need to declare reduced requirements in the February monitoring round, and they wrote their SSEs in line with those reduced positions.

Finally, I turn to the achievements of 2009-2010. As I reminded the House, we are approving and reviewing the spending of the past year, which has been a difficult time for the Assembly. We have had armchair politicians, cynical letter writers, carping journalists and amateur economists tell us that the Assembly is a worthless body and that the Executive deliver nothing for the people of Northern Ireland. That is the kind of negative message that has gone out, as though —

Mr Storey: That is you, David McNarry.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As the Member quite rightly pointed out from a sedentary position, for short-term, cynical political point scoring, some people who sit on these Benches add their voice to that chorus and sometimes join in the unjustified comments of the mob, which seems to want to drag this place down.

It is worth taking a moment to review the money that has been spent, the programme that the Assembly has set in place and the decisions that have been made here. Members from all around the House played a part in making those decisions through Committees and debates and by directing their Ministers. Those decisions have gone through the Executive, who have, of course, had the final say.

We should consider some of the resultant achievements. For example, more than £300 million relates to payments that have been made to farmers under the common agricultural policy, and letters of offer covering £6.7 million in the first tranche of the farm modernisation programme have been issued to 1,268 farm businesses.

In 2009-2010, construction work was completed on 14 major capital school projects. A further two projects are likely to be completed shortly. Contracts have also been signed to provide four new schools: St Mary's primary in Portglenone; St Joseph's primary in Carryduff; Our Lady and St Patrick's College at Knock; and St Patrick's Grammar School in Downpatrick. Furthermore, the go-ahead has been given for a new Magherafelt High School.

In the field of further and higher education, funding of almost £203 million was made available to our two universities to cover teaching, learning and research. The construction of new facilities for the Belfast Metropolitan College began, and construction at other colleges continued, with the South West College opening its technology and skills centre in August 2009.

All that is good news for the local construction industry, and, although I have said it before, I repeat that the construction industry in Northern Ireland is going through a difficult phase. However, as a result of increased investment by the Assembly and the Executive, some 54% of those who are currently employed in the construction industry got their job because

of public sector projects. That, in itself, demonstrates the Assembly's response to a major problem in society.

Members will also be aware of the refurbished Ulster Museum, which officially reopened in October 2009. Construction work commenced on the Titanic signature project building, which is expected to attract 400,000 visitors a year. The financial year commenced with the arrival of 66 new ambulances for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. Construction work began on the new south-west hospital; the Downe Hospital opened in May 2009; the new dementia services development centre opened in Belfast; work on new health and well-being centres is progressing in west Belfast; and the Knockbreda Health and Care Centre opened recently. In addition, a £17 million contract was awarded to provide additional dentists in access hot spots across Northern Ireland.

Much work is progressing on the roads. Most notably, the M2 improvement scheme was completed in June 2009 — the Member for East Londonderry appreciates that, as will you, Mr Speaker, because you are now able to speed your way happily to work each morning — and, in December, the new flyover junction at Cloghogue on the A1 Newry bypass opened, increasing capacity in time for Christmas cross-border shoppers, from which Newry benefited greatly, as the Chamber of Commerce told me when I visited last week. In addition, in my constituency, I was particularly gratified to note the recent award of the contract for the A8 Belfast to Larne dualling project. I look forward to its completion, which will mean that I will have an extra few minutes in bed each morning.

Finally, with the delivery of 1,750 social and more than 500 affordable homes in 2009-2010, the PSA target to deliver 10,000 social and affordable homes by 2013 is on track.

The past year was difficult, as an ever-tightening fiscal situation and continued economic problems gripped our country. Yet, despite the headlines and criticism, as a local Administration, in 2009-2010, we were able to respond to local needs, and we will continue to do so.

I turn now to the current financial year and look ahead to 2010-11. The second motion on the Supply resolution for the 2010-11 Vote on Account seeks the Assembly's approval to issue cash and resources to continue the provision of existing services in the early months of the

next financial year, until the Main Estimates and the corresponding Budget Bill are approved by the Assembly. The Vote on Account covers around 45% of the final 2009-2010 provision for cash and resources, and it will ensure the continuance of public services into 2010-11.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I leave Members with the motions on the 2009-2010 spring Supplementary Estimates, the Vote on Account and the Supply resolution having been tabled. At the end of the debate, I shall endeavour to deal with any issues that have been raised, although Members will, I hope, appreciate that I may not be able to respond to specific departmental issues.

12.30 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann):

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will start by thanking the Minister for his opening remarks and for his explanation of the spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account. First, I will make a statement as the Chairperson of the Committee and then I will make some personal remarks.

At its meeting on 10 February 2010, the Committee for Finance and Personnel took evidence from Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2009-2010 and Vote on Account for 2010-11. Although routine, they are, by necessity, complex matters, and I thank departmental officials for their assistance to the Committee. The spring Supplementary Estimates, the Vote on Account and the associated Budget Bill stem from the 2008-2011 Budget, which was agreed by the Assembly in January 2008. The measures give Departments the authority to spend and set control limits on which the Assembly can hold them to account.

The Committee has approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill, which will be introduced by the Minister later today, and I have written to the Speaker to provide confirmation of that. The spring Supplementary Estimates for 2009-2010 seek the Assembly's approval for any additional resources and/or cash needed over and above what was detailed in the Main Estimates for 2009-2010, which were approved by the Assembly in June 2009. In short, they represent changes that have been made to departmental budgets, mainly through monitoring rounds.

I wish to focus for a moment on the additional headroom that has been built into the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2009-2010. The Committee has examined the issue, given that the provision follows the approach taken last year, albeit at a reduced level. During their evidence to the Committee, DFP officials stated that the headroom included in the 2009-2010 Estimates can be divided into three categories: provision necessary for the equal pay settlement; flexibility to allow the Executive to make allocations in the February monitoring round; and technical changes to accounting standards.

The Committee understands that headroom is included because it is not possible to wait to finalise the Estimates until after the outcome of the February monitoring round has been announced in early March. That is because the Budget Bill, which contains the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account must have Royal Assent before the end of March. Therefore, it is considered prudent in this instance to include the headroom in the Estimates, although the Committee is mindful that that decision should not be taken lightly as the Estimates need to be taut and realistic.

In briefing the Committee, DFP officials also stressed that headroom is neither indicative of the level of reduced requirements that may be declared in the February monitoring round, nor of any decisions on the outcome of that monitoring round. For Departments that have indicated that they intend to bid for resources in February, and where those bids have initially been assessed as reasonable, the upper limit to which they can spend is increased by building in headroom. The Department in question will then have the Assembly's approval to spend up to that limit if, and only if, any additional funding is allocated to it.

In relation to budgetary changes coming from quarterly monitoring rounds, once again, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has undertaken an active scrutiny role throughout the 2009-2010 financial year. The Committee has received timely briefings on the Department's position prior to each monitoring round, followed by written responses to queries that were raised. In addition, following the Minister's statement in plenary on the outcome of each monitoring round, the Committee was briefed on the strategic and cross-cutting issues relating to public expenditure by DFP officials responsible for central finance.

At its meeting on 20 January, the Committee also received a briefing on DFP's review of the in-year monitoring process. Although the Finance and Personnel Committee has been strongly critical of the standard of financial forecasting and monitoring across Departments in the past, I believe that it is important that we acknowledge progress on that front. The evident decline in the level of reduced requirements surrendered in the monitoring round process suggests a welcome improvement in financial management by Departments and compares favourably against the culture of underspend that existed in preceding years, particularly in the period before the restoration of devolution. That improvement goes some way towards ensuring the maximum use of available resources.

I also wish to acknowledge that, although the decline in the amount of money available for redistribution in monitoring rounds means that there is less flexibility to address emerging pressures, the intention to address overcommitment will go some way towards alleviating that. Although the provision of overcommitment was a necessary safeguard in previous years, the anticipation of underspend provided a disincentive for Departments to prepare realistic and finely tuned financial forecasts and budgets.

Members will be aware that the Committee is co-ordinating a response to the review of the 2010-11 spending plans on behalf of all statutory Committees. Given that that is a separate exercise, which was the subject of debate in the House last week, I do not want to reopen that discussion. However, I reiterate that the requirement for such a review at that time highlights the need for the establishment of an effective process to determine future budgets. In that respect, the Committee looks forward to being consulted on the outcome of DFP's review of the Executive's budgetary process.

The Vote on Account for 2010-11 is a practical measure that provides the sums that are needed to enable public services to continue during the early part of the financial year until the Main Estimates and associated Budget Bill are debated before summer 2010. On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support both motions.

I want to make some remarks as an Assembly Member. I hope that I am not classed by the Minister as cynical for doing so.

There are obvious concerns about the overall resources that are available for public spending. However, the Assembly must face the challenge to achieve the best possible outcomes. That includes raising required revenue in a fair and equitable way that will not further disadvantage people in our communities who already face economic difficulties.

In the short term, the Assembly must look at rates and taxation based on a person's ability to pay. That is how they must be set. The debate must start to look at constraints — revenue-raising powers are currently not in the gift of the Assembly and Executive — and, then, to press for the full range of fiscal powers to be made available. Those powers are required to facilitate the delivery of high-quality public services; develop the economy; build prosperity; and redress the inequality and disadvantage that still afflicts substantial portions of society today.

The lack of fiscal autonomy in the North curtails the Executive's ability to implement their policy decisions that could change standards and people's quality of life. The Assembly also needs to open a bigger debate and look to the future. We must remember that people in the North are in greater social and economic need than people in Britain and the South of Ireland.

Mr Beggs: The Member calls for further tax-raising powers. Does she accept that tax-raising powers exist at present in the form of regional rates and possible water charges, which the Executive have chosen not to exercise? Does she accept that the introduction of additional rate-raising powers and taxation may endanger more jobs by adding further burdens to businesses and could, therefore, worsen many people's financial situation?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I must point out that I am calling for a debate to be opened to look at tax-raising powers. I am not coming down on either side. I am talking about opening a debate.

As I said, the Assembly needs to go further to open a wider debate. The existence of two taxation systems North and South further damages business prospects in the North and deepens the economic divide. The Assembly must start to look at the introduction of a single economy and currency in order to grow and build a strong economy on an all-island basis. The absence of that creates huge barriers to

developing a strong economy and providing public services that are needed.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: No. The Member will have his chance later.

The Assembly needs to have that type of debate. It should not curtail that debate by focusing on the powers that it has at present. It should look at the prospect of what it could develop. We need to look on an all-island basis. We must open that debate now.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee

(Mr Weir): Before I address the bulk of my remarks to the Supply resolution as a whole, I want to make a few opening remarks in my capacity as Chairperson of the Audit Committee on the Supply resolution for the 2009-2010 spring Supplementary Estimates.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office came to the Audit Committee at the start of January with details of a Supplementary Estimate. The Estimate was to increase the net resource requirement of the Audit Office by £0.3 million, to £9.6 million. However, that requested increase was a technical adjustment arising from the introduction of international financing reporting standards and would not provide the Audit Office with any additional resources to spend. The net cash requirement would, therefore, remain the same. Consequently, it was a technical, or paper, change. *[Interruption]* Perhaps that is Alistair Darling looking for advice from our Minister in that regard.

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

In considering the Supplementary Estimate from the Audit Office, the Committee consulted with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Public Accounts Committee. The Department and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) were content. In view of that, and having questioned officials from the Audit Office, the Audit Committee unanimously agreed the Supplementary Estimate. That is how a relatively small technical change was dealt with.

I turn now to the Budget and the Supplementary Estimates. May I echo one of the Committee Chairperson's remarks, although I may take issue with some of her others. I also thank the Minister and his officials for the open and transparent way in which they worked with the

Committee on the issue. In the time between the take-note debate and today's debate, it was of great value to have the Minister before the Committee to deal with a range of issues.

On a broader level, concerns were expressed in the take-note debate that the same level of transparency was not applied to the issue by some of the other Departments. To make a degree of judgement on issues arising from the overall cut in the Budget, the failure of a number of Departments to come forward at this stage with detailed spending proposals is disappointing and frustrating, particularly from the point of view of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. Such a lack of information makes it difficult for us to make an overall assessment. I know that the Minister flagged up next year's Estimates last September. Therefore, I do not think that Departments have any excuses for not coming forward with proposals, and I am disappointed that they have not done so.

Overall, it is clear that the strategic direction taken by the Executive a number of years ago, which was to place the economy at the heart of the Executive programme and the budgetary process and which is now working out through the Supplementary Estimates and the Supply resolution, was a wise move. It was a move of necessity, and today's debate is an outworking of the strategy. As the Minister indicated, direct economic support was provided for a range of projects, such as the Bombardier CSeries. There is a range of other financial initiatives.

At times, we can beat ourselves up over capital spend. However, we should remember that although there has been a degree of pressure on capital spend due to circumstances that I will come to later, the level of spend at about £1.4 billion is one of the highest in the history of the state. I think that only last year's exceeded that level. The figures show how much of the capital spend is being used for the benefit of the construction industry. Everyone accepts that the construction industry is hard-pressed because of the broader recession, but the employment of 54% of construction workers in public sector projects shows the level of commitment that exists.

I am sure that if Members were asked to make a wish list of areas in which they would like to see money from the Estimates being spent, they would come up with a list that would be twice as long as is there. We should realise that the level

of public expenditure is extremely large and, on that basis, is to be welcomed.

I will deal briefly with a couple of the Committee Chairperson's remarks. There is some room for flexibility and, as Mr Beggs said in his intervention, there is power to have a degree of variation, particularly with regard to the regional rate.

12.45 pm

I believe that in hard-pressed economic times — although I suspect that Mr Farry and others may disagree — the holding down of the regional rate has been a positive economic boon to the monetary bills of individual households. Also, it has enabled a degree of spend in the economy that would not otherwise have been available. However, I know that the Alliance Party would not subscribe to that position. On a popular radio programme that often labels itself as the biggest show in the country, someone was talking this morning about the rate rises across Northern Ireland, and the Environment Minister was able to say that the regional rate is being held down. I did not hear a rush of Alliance Members phoning up and saying that if they had their way, they would push the regional rate up. There was a stunned silence. However, I am sure that we will hear that at a later stage. Trying to keep the economy to a level where the burden on the ratepayer and the taxpayer is kept to a minimum is to be welcomed.

I will deal briefly with some of the remarks made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, although they were not made in that capacity. She was trying to open up the debate on tax-varying powers, and her argument was that they could be used to supplement the spend. Although I appreciate that it was made in the neutral terms of opening up the debate, there is no doubt where Sinn Féin and, possibly, the SDLP stand on the issue. I see a growing left-of-centre consensus across the Chamber from Mr Farry, who would also be willing to say that.

We should be extremely wary of tax-varying powers. People may find that the consequences of their actions would be counterproductive. Northern Ireland receives a level of subvention from the Treasury because of our circumstances and because of the relatively fair distribution. Would tax-varying powers simply lead to additional money? Would they lead to additional revenue, particularly in the economic circumstances that are likely to move ahead, or would they simply lead to the Treasury cutting large chunks out of

the Northern Ireland Budget, with the end result that we would be no better off financially? The argument would be that if we could raise 3% on income tax or whatever and have not done so, then the Treasury would cut the money, even though we might want to maintain the same level of services. We might find ourselves in a vicious circle where services are hit and people are paying more tax.

Dr Farry: Does the Member accept that there is a reverse side to his argument? We took the decision to fund the deferral of water charges out of the block grant. Equally, the Treasury could ask whether, if we can afford to freeze the regional rate and defer water charges, we need the same level of block grant that it is giving us.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee: We have been able to fund that out of the existing block grant. However, if we simply moved towards larger taxation-varying powers, the incoming Government might, with the tighter financial position, simply seek to take money away from us. Not surprisingly, Sinn Féin's long-standing policy has been that we could help our finances by having a single island economy and a single unit. Notwithstanding the attractions of the Celtic tiger when it was in full roar, if we were to attach ourselves to the basket case of the economic position down South at the moment, it would be akin to creating a single island economy with Greece. There are constraints in relation to that.

There is a wide range of issues, and my time is constrained. I will come back to a number of the points tomorrow during the debate on the Budget Bill. However, I welcome the proposals as a positive way forward and I look forward to Members across the Chamber giving the Finance Minister's proposals a fair wind.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that it is not permissible to have mobile phones and electronic equipment switched on in the Chamber, as it interferes with the recording equipment. It does not take a genius to work out the guilty Members. One just has to look at their eyes, which are cast downwards towards their mobile phones.

Mr McNarry: Despite the recent hype surrounding the Hillsborough debacle, today's debate has a greater public interest value and is more likely to be of immense significance to the House. Therefore, I am pleased to participate in it.

That said, I want to begin with a question for the Minister of Finance and Personnel, which I hope he will answer when making his winding-up speech. We have been told of the considerable logjam of Bills and measures, which are expected to flow from the now unblocked Executive following the much-heralded Hillsborough Castle Agreement. To what extent will that new rush of promised and much-delayed legislation impact on already agreed departmental budgets? Will those new measures and legislation form part of the existing departmental budgets, or will they necessitate further votes? Will they depend on further in-year monitoring rounds, or will they happen at all? Are we to expect some new items in the second budget Bill in June 2010, when the impact of the blocked legislation may be fully known?

The question of how we handle the financial provisions from the expected rush of legislation that will come from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) brings me to another issue.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I ask the Minister to address that issue in the manner that I suggested.

Some weeks ago, representatives of the public spending directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel told the Committee for Finance and Personnel that the Department was undertaking a review of the in-year monitoring process. That is a welcome move, and it is something that my party has called for consistently for the past year and a half. In-year monitoring has involved the redistribution of some £2 billion during the past four years, and there are concerns that the present system is no longer fit for purpose. If that is the case, we must say so and move on.

It has been clear for some time that the structural pressures in the system have made the in-year monitoring process progressively less effective. Those pressures require the Northern Ireland Departments to spend public money more effectively, leaving less slack available for redistribution. They also highlight the inadequacy of an ad hoc system of unplanned underspends as a proper, defensible, efficient means of redistribution between Departments.

Anticipated cuts in the block grant are likely to become more apparent after the general election. Those cuts may be dressed up as operational

efficiencies, but they will inevitably mean that money will be much tighter than it has been hitherto. As recently as last weekend, a group of leading economists, including a former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, a former deputy governor of the Bank of England and head of the Financial Services Authority and a former permanent secretary to the Treasury, warned that action to reduce the country's borrowing should start immediately after the general election. They also advised that the next Government should attempt to seek to eliminate the bulk of Britain's deficit within the lifetime of one Parliament; that there was a compelling case for the first measures to cut the deficit to begin in the 2010-11 fiscal year, which is only two months away; and that the bulk of the deficit reduction should come from spending cuts rather than tax increases.

Yesterday, the Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Kenneth Clarke, who has been there before and has some experience in these matters, warned that the next Government will have to introduce tougher spending cuts than any recent Administration.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I am in a flow, so —

Mr Storey: We had not noticed. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNarry: As you have been rude, I will certainly not give way. *[Laughter.]*

Kenneth Clarke stated that the level of cuts that we are contemplating will probably:

“exceed those of any modern government.”

He went on to say:

“We are going to have to be much tougher on public spending than Margaret Thatcher ever was.”

We all know that such a programme of public spending cuts will impact disproportionately on Northern Ireland because of our high levels of public sector employment.

We need consensus on how to cope with that situation. That will not only force a comprehensive rewrite of the Programme for Government but may lead to a new method of managing and prioritising — that is the key element — all government programmes in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I hope that more frequent in-year monitoring rounds may be possible given the increasing sophistication of financial management

information systems, thus enabling a more robust and flexible response to emerging situations than has previously been possible.

We may have to move towards a more sophisticated common overall priority that is based on scale for all government programmes. That would place every government programme across all Departments on a common weighted scale, with pre-agreed ratings being applied for key substantive elements of all programmes and relative weights for politically pre-prioritised factors, such as healthcare, job creation and social need, which are intrinsic to those programmes. The Assembly will not tolerate a priority that simply reduces money for health services.

Those weightings could be either a numerical scale or a system of banding, so that discussions on spending cuts could be taken, and be seen to be taken, on a fair and equitable basis. Such a system would prevent the potential nightmare scenario under the current system, which relies on departmental cuts as opposed to overall cuts. For instance, a football club could get new grounds, while a hospital ward could be closed anywhere in the country. Today's vote on the Supply resolution is merely a staging post on the way towards a more radical overhaul of the entire system.

I again ask the Minister, despite the complications, to consider mechanisms for a contingency fund for rainy days; I know that he is sympathetic to that. Despite our protestations, the block grant is likely to be reduced, and austerity measures are forecast after the next election, so the overall forecast is for a rainy day ahead. I also ask the Minister to reconsider the disposal of non-required assets in the light of today's market prices rather than the inflated figures that appear on the balance sheet. There is no point in writing into the books that an asset is worth £50 million when it is worth only £5 million. Let us face the reality of its real worth and what money its disposal can realise.

What preparations are being made for the reductions and the demands that a new Government will administer across the United Kingdom? I am sure that preparations are being made, and the House and the public want to know about them as soon as possible. The Minister must tell us what he has in mind to address a hit list from Westminster that could include job cuts, wage freezes, recruitment freezes and hardship demands. We all know

that the situation will not improve, and we must not only be prepared in the Assembly but be acting responsibly in bringing the public with us. I will now give way to the rude Member if he wishes to make a point.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I was not being rude; I was being factual. Will the Member clarify whether he was speaking as a member of the Ulster Unionist Party or on behalf of Tory Party central office? The incoming Government has made it clear that they will implement cuts. Will the Member confirm whether he approves those cuts, given the fact that the wedding has taken place between his party and the Tories?

Mr McNarry: I could address that question to the party that is keeping, and has kept, the Labour Party in government in recent times and seems to continue to want to do so. The only party in Northern Ireland that will ask the electorate to dispose of that government is the Ulster Unionist Party. The DUP is not saying that we should get rid of the Labour Party.

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

1.00 pm

Mr McNarry: In answer to his response: I am wedded to what is best for Northern Ireland and for our needs. That is why the Budget is essential, and that is why I asked the questions of the Minister.

Mr O'Loan: In last week's take-note debate, I said that I had some sympathy for the position in which the Minister finds himself. He had two predecessors during the current three-year budgetary round, and we are entering the third year. Therefore, the Minister cannot be held entirely responsible for all that has happened. I said that I had some respect for the fact that he is the first of those three Ministers to concede that we have a serious financial situation to address.

The Minister demurred when I used the phrase:

"an atmosphere of financial crisis". — [Official Report, Vol 48, No 2, p 62, col 2].

I still contend that that is an accurate phrase. All of us are in close day-to-day contact with public agencies in health, education, roads, and so on, and through our interactions with them, we know the intensity of the pressures that they

face. They tell us that there are things that they would like to deliver but cannot.

If a word-association test were carried out in which the public of Northern Ireland were offered the word "budget", the word "cuts" would be offered back in many cases. That reflects the present atmosphere, and that is even before next year's Budget, which will reduce spending by £370 million, is addressed. I stand over my description of the situation. The fact that we are in this situation after a real-terms increase in the Northern Ireland block over the three-year period puts a question mark on how the Budget has been managed.

The serious pressures for next year have been described frequently as relating to the deferral of water charges and the equal pay issue. I have two points to make on the equal pay issue, one of which I made last week and the other I did not. My first point concerns when the equal pay issue became known and the lack of provision for it. In a broad sense, the issue was known for many years, but specific knowledge about when it was coming to a head and about how much money was involved was certainly known to the Minister of Finance in May 2007, when, I believe, we were told that exact information and quantification of the problem had been sought from NISRA. Information was being sought because it was known that the problem was coming to a head and because there was a pretty clear idea of the scale of the problem and that the scale was great. I am extremely critical of the Minister of Finance of the time because, when the three-year Budget was being considered, that information was not laid before the Assembly as it should have been.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand the Member's point, but does he recognise that we were in negotiations with the trade unions and to have given an indication of what we expected the bill to be would have been an appalling way to negotiate with anyone? It would have involved having to reveal our bottom line and what we thought the amount should be. There would have been no point in negotiations. The whole point about our not making any figures public is that we were in negotiations about equal pay.

Mr O'Loan: I understand and accept the Minister's point, but I am not referring to that period. I am referring to a period well before formal negotiations had started and when the

three-year Budget was being prepared. At that time, there was an onus on the Minister to tell us about the nature of the equal pay problem and that it would have to be addressed during the three-year Budget period. The Finance Minister of the time did not do so.

In last week's debate, the Minister understood my point on retired workers exactly. He said correctly:

"If the Member is saying that we should go beyond the equality legislation and its requirements, we must look at the rationale for that and the attached costs." — [Official Report, Vol 48, No 2, p75, col 2].

I wish to make clear my stance on that. The negotiations were informed by the equal pay legislation, not dictated by it. Had we simply been proceeding on a legislative basis, we could have let the tribunal sort out the matter. Although the legislation was a significant element in the negotiations, it was not absolutely binding. We need only consider the situation for EO2 staff to know that that was the case. Management and the unions agreed that those staff had no case for a settlement under the equal pay legislation, and yet a settlement was made, as well as a further commitment to examine their position as a priority element in a further review. There is a moral case for addressing the situation of retired workers, and, in fairness to them, that ought to be done.

I note what the Minister said about how two projects will offset the significant reduction in the capital acquisition from the disposal of assets. I asked him about those projects — the Royal Exchange project and the waste management project — when he appeared before the Committee. He agreed with me that those crucial projects must go ahead in due course. There is a need to indicate the manner in which that will be done — I hope to say a bit more about that later — and to align the present strategy with what will happen in future years.

Given the budgetary situation for the Westminster Government, we all have concerns that there will be significant cuts to the Northern Ireland block grant, and we have talked here about making a case for that to be based on need. We were not convinced that the House of Lords Barnett Formula Select Committee would be terribly sympathetic to the Northern Ireland situation. However, it reported that, in respect of relative spend on Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland is underfunded,

and we must give it credit for that report. However, no one has gone back to the Treasury to make that case. The Minister of Finance and Personnel told the Committee that his officials are in regular contact with the Treasury, but the Assembly has not heard anything about a further case being made.

In presenting the Budget for next year, the Minister told us nothing about what the beginnings of the strategic approach to the next three years might look like. When the Minister was preparing this Budget for the final year of the first three-year round, it would have made sense for him to have spelt out the anticipated strategy for the next three years, because there will be a markedly different situation then. Is there, in fact, a strategy? If so, it certainly has not been presented.

Of course, there is the issue of potential cuts even in the 2010-11 monitoring round. Has any case been made to the Labour Party and the Conservative Party about the fact that cuts could push the Northern Ireland economy further back into recession? The monitoring round's inability to deal with contingencies is also a serious issue.

Last week, I referred to page 23 of the Department's review of the spending plans. It states that there should be:

"a targeted basis in respect of the scope for some departments to accommodate a greater reduction in funding for 2010-11."

Although the Minister of Finance and Personnel says that he talked to the Ministers of the individual Departments, we have in front of us a Civil Service answer to the question of what needs to be done for next year. A far more political answer ought to have been delivered. I again refer to the SDLP proposals for an annual budget to create an Assembly Committee that would prioritise the Budget. Members should note that the Committee for Finance and Personnel will not do that job. That Committee received reports from the individual Committees and will report on those shortly. However, it is not the job of the Committee for Finance and Personnel — the other Committees would greatly resent it — to say that priority A in one Department is of greater worth than priority B in another Department.

There is no political element in the Assembly currently doing that job, and we believe that

there should be. Our party has said that there ought to be a Budget that meaningfully addresses the downturn and meshes present plans with what we hope will be an upturn in the future.

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

Mr O'Loan: I leave my remarks at that.

Dr Farry: We support the resolutions before us this afternoon, or, as it may turn out to be, this evening. That is the only responsible thing to do to ensure that the money is there to be spent by Departments. This debate is probably part of a wider rolling debate that we will have over the coming weeks on the current financial and economic situation that is facing Northern Ireland. We shall do our best to try to avoid repeating ourselves over the course of that.

Rather than rehearsing a set speech, I want to respond to some of the comments that have been made. Comments were made about tax-varying powers, and my party is keen to support those as something that the Assembly should seek to have. One would expect any regional Government elsewhere in the world to have such powers. Any tax-varying powers would be funded from the block grant, and we would forego such revenue in Northern Ireland in the same way as we approach water charges.

The Ulster Unionist Party lectures Sinn Féin about tax-varying powers. However, I was under the impression that one of the very few policies to emerge from the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists — New Force (UCUNF) arrangement is that of enterprise zones. An enterprise zone will mean powers by which to lower rates of tax. I remind the Ulster Unionist Party that it is one thing to argue for enterprise zones, but it is another to be unprepared to support tax-varying powers: without one, there cannot be the other.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: This will be good.

Mr Beggs: I referred to comments made by Sinn Féin whereby it was very clear that it wanted to increase the tax burden on businesses. Does the Member accept that that would affect jobs and, because even more people would become dependent on benefits, it would affect those in our society who are most needy?

Dr Farry: Tax-varying powers can result in taxes going up or down. However, if there is a loss of revenue, it has to be funded from somewhere else.

Mr Hamilton: What is the Member's view on Mr Beggs's earlier contribution? Is he saying that the burden of lost revenue should be passed onto households or, heaven forbid, should create a black hole?

Dr Farry: That is the logic of what was said. Money does not grow on trees, and if we take from one element of funding, we have to take from another to balance that.

There is an argument doing the rounds — the Tories are certainly pressing it very strongly — that we have to pay off our debt in a hurry. Economists concur that carrying a lot of debt is a major drag and something to be avoided. However, there is no consensus on how quickly debt should be paid off. There is still a risk of a double-dip recession, particularly in Northern Ireland, but also on a UK-wide level. Therefore, some degree of common sense needs to be applied. There is a sense that the UUP is in a headlong rush to enter into cuts that are not in the interest of Northern Ireland. At the same time, that party is insisting that we protect our Health Service from any cuts whatsoever. The two things simply do not add up. The UUP cannot say that we should pass the burden onto all other aspects of expenditure in Northern Ireland at the same time as protecting job creation, because the burden would be put onto one Department — for example, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — which would take the entire hit of rebalancing the Budget. Those sums do not add up.

We see major problems ahead in the Budget. That can be traced back to major distortions within the financial arrangements for Northern Ireland. I fully respect the right of the Assembly to set its own spending and revenue-raising priorities for which it has the responsibility and the power. However, that has to be done responsibly, and we have to ensure that we are doing things in the correct manner. Much more benchmarking is necessary, of what we are doing and of what is happening in other jurisdictions, in particular, in our neighbouring jurisdictions. We have to ask whether distortions in our budgets are correct and justifiable, or, whether they point to a much more fundamental problem of inefficiency that we need to address.

I will not labour the point about the cost of division again; people know where my party stands on that issue.

1.15 pm

Mr Weir invited me to talk about household taxation, and I will take his bait. We have to accept that households in Northern Ireland pay less tax than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. That may be justifiable, but, nevertheless, it is a fact, and we must factor that into our approaches to the Treasury.

The continued deferral of water charges is having a massive effect on our Budget. We must find ways to address the immediate £370 million gap, because the deferral of water charges was not factored in when the Budget was compiled.

The regional rate is also an issue. I am not suggesting that we fill the £370 million gap through a 140% increase in the regional rate, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel suggested last week. However, even an inflationary rise in the regional rate each year for three years would bring in some £25 million to £30 million. That is not a huge sum, but every little helps, and it would make a difference. A freeze in the regional rate is actually a cut, and it is happening at the same time as major cuts in public expenditure. People who do not pay rates have a disproportionate dependence on public services, which are suffering. Although people will respond negatively to attacks on the policy of freezing the regional rate, the intangible benefits that people receive from their regional rate contributions need to be pointed out. People in Northern Ireland are very dependent on their public services.

The Executive are freezing the regional rate, but councils are showing a lack of discipline. Councillors across Northern Ireland are saying to themselves that if they increase rates by 7%, that will have only half the impact because the Executive have frozen the regional rate. Councillors think that because the Executive take all the responsibility, they do not need to have the same sense of discipline.

We must also consider the level of expenditure in Northern Ireland and the distortions in spending across the different headings and in Departments. Public expenditure statistical analyses, which are produced by the Treasury every year, show that we spend well above

the UK average in areas such as agriculture, employment and economic development, perhaps not as efficiently as we should. In other areas such as transport and the environment, we spend less than the UK average.

In areas such as health and education, where our spending is at the level that it should be, there is a question about whether we do things correctly. For example, despite our large spend on health, we still spend less per capita than the UK average in areas such as mental health. That begs the question of where we spend more per capita on health services compared with the UK average. Are those distortions justified, or do they point to more fundamental problems that we have to get grips with as a society? I suggest that the answer is the latter.

We find ourselves in a rather difficult situation due to the £370 million cut in spending. The Minister says that the issue is not simply a battle between cuts in front line services and administrative savings in Departments. It is much too simplistic to view the issue in those terms. We must consider different priorities, and I welcome the approach that he recommends. We must take that approach to a different level and have a more fundamental root-and-branch examination of where we spend money, whether we spend money in the right areas and whether we should do things differently.

We must also recognise the fact that there have been missed opportunities; we could have invested money in certain areas, had the resources been here to begin with. I am struck by the fact that we did not have the same degree of fiscal stimulus to respond to the economic downturn that the UK Government and the Administrations in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland had. We received some Barnett consequentials from increased spending at a UK level, but those were used to offset emerging financial pressures. We did not use them to try to rebalance our economy and to do things differently.

I respect what the Executive have done with our economy, particularly the unprecedented level of capital investment. However, the business community is not entirely uncritical of the Executive's handling of the economy. Even when it comes to taxation issues, the business community points out that there have been major opportunity costs to the Executive's approach. The money that has been lost could

have been invested to improve our economy and to do things differently.

Therefore, it is important to view the business community's contribution in a much more subtle way rather than simply anticipating that it only wants cost cuts. Cutting costs will not address the structural imbalances in our economy.

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

Dr Farry: All it will do is make business cheaper. It will not change anything in the long run. The Executive and the Assembly have a responsibility to transform Northern Ireland for the better. We look forward to rejoining the debate tomorrow.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education (Mr Storey): I rise as Chairperson of the Education Committee to speak first of all on the Department of Education's surrender of capital and resource moneys through the in-year monitoring rounds in 2009-2010, as reflected in the reconciliation in the Estimates before the House today.

The Committee questioned Department of Education officials at some length as to why £9 million of capital expenditure was surrendered in the December monitoring round. The Committee had no difficulty in understanding how that easement had arisen but had major concerns as to why the £9 million could not have been used to address some of the extensive deficiencies in the schools estate.

I note the Finance Minister's opening remarks, in which he commended Departments for making progress and stated that some had displayed good financial management. However, given the current financial restraints that the Minister of Education repeatedly tells us that education is facing, many Members in the House today will question the financial management in the Department of Education that was not able to identify a process early enough to address a shortfall of £9 million. One issue of grave concern was that no on-the-shelf projects had been identified as a result of consultation between the Department and the education and library boards that could have been approved or moved forward.

Eighty approved school building projects await the go-ahead for site works and construction. However, senior officials have told the

Committee that, without additional capital funding in 2010-11, no new school projects will be released in 2010-11, and all minor work spends will be restricted to those that are necessary to meet statutory requirements, such as health and safety. However, that situation has been contradicted by the Minister of Education, who appeared before the Committee two weeks ago and informed us that she, as the Minister, will make decisions on capital spend for 2010-11. I will return to that matter as a private Member in a few minutes.

To make matters worse, the Committee was informed at the meeting in December of a £278 million backlog in requests for maintenance work in schools. Members across the House will be aware of the huge issue in schools in their constituencies. The Committee had similar concerns about the Department's surrender of £0.8 million of capital funding for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); subjects that are critical to our economy at this time. Expenditure on STEM subjects should have been properly planned and managed.

I ask the Finance Minister to investigate why there was a redefining of the moneys for STEM projects. Although an element of it arose as a result of a policy change that was instigated by the Minister, the Department then brought schools that were not listed as STEM schools but that covered subjects such as humanities, art and music into the specialist schools programme. If we want to ensure that STEM is at the heart of our educational programme to assist our economy, serious questions must be asked about why capital expenditure was reduced from £75,000 to £25,000 and why the cohort of schools and criteria were changed. One must ask whether that decision was motivated by political interference or purely to ensure good outcomes.

I will make some remarks in relation to the Committee for Education about the 2010-11 education budget as reflected in the Vote on Account motion. The Executive have proposed additional savings of some £52 million in resources and £22 million in capital. However, the Minister of Education informed the Committee that she already had resource pressures of some £40 million, and her senior officials identified a further £70 million capital requirement for 2010-11. The Committee has made a serious effort to inform its members of the Minister of Education's spending plans for

2010-11, having had lengthy evidence sessions on the education budget with senior officials and five meetings with the Minister herself.

Today, however, I want to highlight the fact that the Committee is still awaiting information from the Minister on key measures to address those budget pressures. Therefore, in the time that is allotted to me to speak as a Member of the Assembly, I will begin by asking the Member opposite —

Mr McLaughlin: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was listening very carefully to the Member's comments, and for a time, I was unconfident as to whether I had missed his declaration that he was speaking in a personal capacity. Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask you to review Mr Storey's comments, given that he has just now indicated that he wishes to speak in a personal capacity, and to determine whether he was genuinely, accurately and objectively representing the views of the Committee for Education. I am very much of the belief that he was not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is a very difficult issue to judge, Mr McLaughlin. I can review the comments, and they will be reviewed, but it is a very difficult judgement for me to make.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: I am quite happy to have anything that I say in the House reviewed. If some Members are uncomfortable with facts, that is an issue for them to address. It seems as though the Minister of Education needs a platoon of defenders in the House.

I will return to the issues that I wanted to address. I would appreciate it if Jennifer McCann could confirm that she was still on-message when she spoke about fiscal policies. In times past, she has obviously not been on-message about education issues, as she has been at complete variance with the Minister of Education over mistakes that have been made. Does anyone in the House really believe the fantasy politics of Sinn Féin or the SDLP that, somehow, a fiscal policy united to the Irish Republic would put us in a far better position? Surely that, as Mr Weir suggested, is like asking the Greek Government to write us a cheque. That is not where we should be heading at this time.

I will now speak about capital spend and the serious financial issues that face the Assembly, and education in particular. It is disconcerting

that although the Minister is undertaking a review of capital spend projects, we still do not know the criteria that will establish whether capital builds will go ahead. It was clear from the Minister's comments on 8 February 2010 that her capital spending policy will be based on criteria and the entitlement framework. However, she also told us:

"We must take into account the reviews of special educational needs and Irish-medium." — [Official Report, Vol 48, No 1, p46, col 2].

We have seen the problems that were highlighted in special educational needs policy, but we have not seen the review of Irish-medium education or what the outcomes might be of such a review.

I give this warning to the House today: if, in trying to redress the serious imbalance in the school estate, any financial jiggery-pokery is engaged in to give preference to a sector that educates 1% of the school population, it will not be tolerated. We need to make that clear in the House today, just in case anyone has any illusions about or is in any doubt as to the seriousness of the situation that we find ourselves in.

1.30 pm

In considering another area of concern with finances, we need to have in place a long-term planning process that delivers for our education system in a way that secures quality education for our children in a twenty-first-century environment. In many places, however, that is not happening.

I support the motion.

Mr McLaughlin: I support the motion. I am on record as saying that the Minister had a most difficult job to do. He had to address the impact of the economic downturn in a way that permits Departments to address, on a continuing basis, the outstanding priorities of the Programme for Government. At the same time, he had to strongly encourage Departments to identify further efficiencies. That is the way to go, and, for that reason, the Minister should be commended.

I endorse some of Declan O'Loan's comments. He mentioned that there have been three Finance Ministers in the first two years of this three-year Budget, which clearly means that the Minister had to address the situation as he found it. I think that he has set it out clearly for us.

The Budget itself was agreed two years ago, in February 2008, in much more benign economic circumstances and in an atmosphere of generally greater expectation and ambition. However, the economic circumstances have changed utterly since early 2008. Although Ministers have managed to maintain the trajectory of the Programme for Government and its Budget allocations, clear and logical impacts were felt. In some ways, some consequences are that the discussions on fiscal autonomy and the potential of the all-island economy have resurfaced.

We must consider all our options as we move forward. The status quo arrangement certainly has its strengths, which must be acknowledged, but one consequence is that people tend to gloat when other economies run into trouble. However, all economies are in trouble; this is a global phenomenon to which different states are responding in different ways. Some states have at their command economic and fiscal tools that they can use in these circumstances. We, however, do not. We have to float like a cork. We follow the trend that is set elsewhere, which is perhaps governed by priorities that are important elsewhere but do not reflect our own.

I welcome continued debate on the matter. I do not see any immediate prospect of agreement across the board. However, we could perhaps do worse than consider the position of the Scottish regional parliament and what appears to be an evident enthusiasm there for managing the economy, garnering more independence and adopting a more innovative approach to the economy. We could ask ourselves why Members there appear to have in their minds, their contemplations and their planning greater flexibility than is demonstrated at any time here.

There is a slavish dependency, and I do not say that to be pejorative. Some people get migraine headaches as soon as fiscal autonomy is mentioned. They will ask what the consequences for Barnett would be. There would be consequences, but we should not be afraid to talk about it or examine whether there are better possibilities than are currently being deployed. There are some associations — for some Members across the Floor, those associations are much better developed than in my case — but we should be talking to our counterparts in the other Assemblies to see what their approach is.

We know that, come the next election and its outcome, whatever the Administration, the question will be who will bite hardest at the resource and capital that will be available to the Assembly going forward. We know that. The situation will get worse.

A colleague of mine travelled to Birmingham on a business trip. He made his accommodation arrangements with a four-star hotel and paid £25 for a one-night stay with bed and breakfast and an evening meal.

Mr Hamilton: I will speak to you about that later.

Mr McLaughlin: Yes. He went out for a drink to a brand new multi-storey building beside the hotel, which had themed bars on 10 floors. There were 10 people in the building. We do not realise here, because of the success of our ministerial team and because of the way in which public funding is available, what is happening elsewhere. Birmingham has four times the population of this region, and it has had to slash and burn just to survive. The economy is in pieces.

I do not think that there is room for people to look southwards and say that it is a basket case. There are plenty of basket cases. People should reflect on our position before they say such things about the South. If it was not for the public service and public funding, we would know what a basket case is.

If we have set ourselves a priority, which all parties have endorsed, then let us go for it. Let us take the hard decisions as well as the easy ones. We should be prepared to recognise that the future recovery of these neighbouring economies will probably be somewhat in advance of our own. That is because of the public expenditure that provides a buttress and protects us. That also means that we will have a lag time of possibly as much as a year before we see the type of recovery that will be possible elsewhere.

The economies in the South and in Britain will recover more quickly, and the economy in Scotland will recover more quickly than we do because it has a slightly different cultural approach. We can learn lessons from them. In what we call a budgetary process, we should be prepared to widen our horizons and examine that.

I support the proposition to allow our Departments to go on spending money and to

draw on account. That is a no-brainer; it has to be supported. We should recognise that the Minister has addressed some of the hard questions in the here and now, but it is time for a strategic stocktake about how our economy relates to the economy on the island, on the neighbouring island and internationally.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I suspect that you will be getting a lot of correspondence enquiring as to the name of the four-star hotel at £25 a night for bed and breakfast.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I would have looked up the name of that hotel on my mobile had you permitted me to do so in the Chamber. Clearly there is going to be a rush of demand for that hotel.

The Minister for Finance and Personnel: The rates have already gone up.

Mr McLaughlin: I am sure that we will get a letter from Birmingham thanking us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I must get on to TripAdvisor later.

I will speak initially as Chairman of the Social Development Committee and make some pertinent remarks in respect of how the motion before us affects that particular Department's expenditure.

As the House is aware, Committee members have been very concerned with the outworking of budgetary decisions in the current fiscal year, which, as everybody would admit, have been taken in the face of very difficult financial conditions. The spring Supplementary Estimates chart the significant changes that have been made to the Department for Social Development's budget throughout the financial year. The principal challenge has, of course, been the reduction in the availability of capital that was brought about by a significant drop in the sale of land and houses.

As Members will recall, the budgetary problems led to some short-term but disturbing difficulties with the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme. The Committee welcomed the Executive's joined-up response to the problems with the SPED scheme, and I know that the Finance Minister was intimately involved in that response. We hope that that important scheme

will be funded for as long as it is needed. Sadly, it is still needed in a great many cases.

The funding issues for the social housing development programme, though perhaps a little less emotive, were considerably more challenging. The solutions that the Department adopted caused considerable consternation to members and led to the Committee for Social Development's first motion in a plenary sitting in the Chamber. The scale and timing of the reallocation of funding to social house building from Northern Ireland Housing Executive maintenance contracts or private sector renovation grants caused disquiet among the public and not a little dislocation and, possibly, even some redundancies among contractors. The Committee accepts that the challenge that faces the social housing programme is substantial and that the solutions will not be easy. It is hoped that, in the coming year, the Department will be imaginative in its approach to the funding of new social housing and more transparent in its treatment of the inevitable changes to related budgets and their impact on PSA targets. I note with some positivity the rise in Housing Executive sales in the first eight months of the current financial year. Hopefully, that will continue, because it is an important source of revenue for the Department. I welcome the final finding of the promised £20 million for Egan contracts. That is rolling out across the country and having a positive impact on many of our constituents' homes.

On a number of occasions, the House has heard me refer to the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement in the context of DSD as well as DFP. The spring Supplementary Estimates show substantial provisions for 2009-2010, which, it is understood, are to be met entirely at the centre. However, in the coming year, the ongoing costs for the Department for Social Development are believed to be around £12 million, which I understand will have to be found by the Department itself. All Members will accept that that is a significant and ongoing pressure. A solution that has been much talked about is improved efficiency of operation, and we want to encourage that. It is hoped that there may be some flexibility in meeting the equal pay pressure in the short term and that DSD will be assisted in its attempts to enhance the efficiency of the delivery of its services and thus cut its costs. We need to bear that in mind, given the large number of individuals who work within the confines of DSD and whose grade

has been affected by the equal pay claim, most notably those in the Social Security Agency and the child maintenance and enforcement division.

The spring Supplementary Estimates also refer to the changing provisions for urban regeneration and community development. The amounts of money that are involved are much smaller than those that relate to the housing programme or, indeed, to social security payments. Nonetheless, the impact of the relatively small spends on deprived communities throughout Northern Ireland is significant. The Committee is concerned that the Department has yet to provide clarity on key community development contracts and thereby secure the immediate future of small community programmes. The Committee trusts that the Department will move quickly to support those important front line services and thus provide assurance to deprived communities. That concludes what I want to say as the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

I now want to make some broader comments about the spring Supplementary Estimates. All Members would acknowledge, and, indeed, others who have spoken have acknowledged, the major importance of this issue. However, as the Minister alluded to earlier, looking around the Chamber, one might wonder whether we are actually voting for the expenditure of such a significant amount of money.

1.45 pm

Everyone has to accept that we are in the midst of difficult budgetary times and that we are on the brink of perhaps even more difficult, testing and trying budgetary times. There is a need for the same flavour of debate that we had in last week's take-note debate on the revised departmental expenditure plans. It could be said that there is a growing maturity in the manner in which Members debate how to address the very difficult budgetary situation that Northern Ireland will face in the years to come. Therefore, we must approach the debate in that spirit. There is no benefit in our talking in the House about financial matters with the name-calling, posturing and catcalling that we have used in the past. Some Members mentioned the pet projects or hobby horses that they want to see address this problem. We owe it to ourselves, to each other and to the people of Northern Ireland to address those problems maturely and sensibly.

I could take issue with many of the points that have been made. I could take issue with, for example, the idea that an all-island economy is a panacea that would solve if not all our problems certainly a substantial number of them. I am not some sort of Neanderthal who thinks that trade across the border should end. Rather, I think that such trade should increase, particularly if Northern Ireland companies are trading with those in the South. There is significant scope to see growth in that trade. I want to encourage it, and we should do all that we can to ensure that it grows. Procurement is a matter that the Department of Finance and Personnel deals with, so I want to see more companies here involved in that area.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for giving way. I am not sure whether the Member who spoke previously picked this up wrongly, but there is no element of gloating about the economic difficulties that the Irish Republic or any other country faces. We may have political differences with the Republic, but we recognise that the economic reality is that cross-border trade is affected. What happens in one part of this island will have an economic impact on the other part. The co-operation that Ministers have sought to engage in recognises that reality, and we seek to work within our available limits.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I thank the Minister for his intervention. That is exactly my point. Although we do not look down South and want the troubles and travails that are being experienced there, we recognise that those troubles have a negative impact on our economy. We may have experienced some sort of benefit through increased retail sales in major superstores, particularly those that are on the border. One could analyse the real benefit to the Northern Ireland economy that that represents, but it is sizeable when it comes to sustaining, or perhaps even growing, employment. It may also improve the expansion rates of those companies. That is one positive element. However, although that type of expenditure may be increasing, some companies in the South are not trading at the same level that they were. That then affects Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector, which is a linchpin of our economy. Therefore, we are not gloating. I am sure that the Minister is glad that he is not in the shoes of his counterpart in the Irish Republic in having to deal with the difficult

problems that they face. Although we have had problems in dealing with the difficult public expenditure situation in Northern Ireland, we have agreed collectively and in a joined-up way on the tough decisions that we have taken. In the South, much more severe action has had to be taken. For example, social welfare payments and public sector pay have been cut. I am grateful that we have not had to face that sort of problem in Northern Ireland, and long may that be the case. As the Member who spoke previously said, the prudent management that our current ministerial team has engaged in has meant that we have not had to face those sorts of difficulties.

Other issues have arisen today that I would like to comment on. Unfortunately, however, time does not permit me to do so.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I am keen to check out the bargains that are to be had in tourism on the mainland, although I would also like to encourage tourism from the South to Northern Ireland. I hope to pick up on some of those comments at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill tomorrow.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Hamilton's contributions, which demonstrated an informed position on the economy of the rest of this island, will one day make him a fine Member of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

The SDLP is very worried, not about the specific plans that are before us but about the process that has brought about those plans. We are still in a Budget process that started three years ago and that takes no account of the many and serious changes that have taken place in these islands and globally since then. Rather than having a debate about a series of Supplementary Estimates, we should be having a separate one about a new and fitting Budget that is capable of recognising the serious crisis that envelops this region and has impacted on us.

I noted the Minister's comments about the way in which the Executive have been able to insulate many of those in our society from the worst impact of a lot of what has gone on. However, the truth is that we have been doing little more than putting a sticking plaster over a problem when we could and should have been

doing so much more. We remain concerned about the extent to which this budgetary process has been predicated on efficiency savings and asset sales that are yet to be realised. We also have serious worries about the ability of this process to truly and properly defend front line services.

The Minister is famous for having a sceptical view about certain aspects of climate change. I am glad that his scepticism about the existence of a recession ended last December. Despite the fact that the process is wrong, inefficient and inadequate, we must resolve to try to address the serious shortcomings that we know will exist in the year ahead. Shortcomings in health have led 90-year-olds to rely on 15 minutes each week for their showers. They have led to a major part of the proposed services at the beautiful new hospital in Downpatrick, County Down, being threatened because of the inability of the trust to secure the funding for said services. The shortcomings have resulted in old people in your constituency, Mr Deputy Speaker, worrying about their ability to get a hot meal. The shortcomings also lead to daily headlines about whether wards will stay open. They have caused cardiac patients, in particular, to endure extra stress on top of a condition that is already stressful enough.

The Minister made a significant and serious contribution to this debate, and I do not want for one second to take away from it. I apologise if I failed to correctly hear the Minister, but I did not hear a single reference to the working poor during his contribution. I did not hear a reference to the hundreds of families who are now homeless as a consequence of the serious recession into which this region and the world around it has been plunged in recent years. Nor did I hear references to the Republic of Ireland or the European Union. I wonder whether we need to have a more serious debate in the proper context of where we sit, not just as a public finance entity but as a region in Ireland, in these islands and in the European Union.

The SDLP calls for a new Budget because it is time to review fundamentally our spending priorities. It is time to bring forward proposals that are capable of ring-fencing front line services.

Mr F McCann: In the midst of your presentation, I noticed that you mentioned front line services. Would you not agree that your Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should refer all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr F McCann: Sorry, Chair. Would you not agree that your Minister has proposed almost £14 million of cuts that will directly affect maintenance, will cost jobs, will hit community economic programmes and may lead to the closure of some projects? Those are all front line service cuts, and they will directly impact on communities.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr McCann's intervention. He makes my point: we operate in a budgetary process that was set three years ago and makes no provision to ring-fence or specially protect front line services, so efficiencies are being forced on Ministers.

There is a difference between the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health. The Minister for Social Development has had to deal with the realities of the efficiencies that were forced on her. That has not stopped her continuing to invest in public housing and make what provision she can for it. At least she has had the courage to tackle those efficiencies, as Mr Hamilton acknowledged. That is in stark contrast to the Minister of Health who, despite the shared determination of every party in the House to protect and support him in defending front line services, has yet to bring a single line of proposals as to how efficiencies can be sought elsewhere. I cannot come to an even moderately intelligent conclusion about how we save front line services if the Minister of Health will not share with us the basic information necessary for all of us collectively to protect such services. Therefore, I welcome Mr Fra McCann's intervention. He made the very point that I seek to make, which is that the current botched budgetary mechanism is not adequate. It is just not fit for purpose given the reality of our situation.

We all agree that we need new priorities to stimulate economic activity and generate jobs. The social housing building programme that we spoke about a few seconds ago is a way of doing such things. However, this Budget should go much deeper and should be much more strategic in stimulating building and capital investment across the board. We must also be able to prepare businesses and employers for a recovery phase of the recession. However, there is nothing in the current Programme for Government or Budget that would allow us to do

that, other than programmes that have existed for years.

We need to protect vulnerable households and individuals from the worst impacts of the global recession, yet, because the Budget was designed before the recession started, it is often unable to do that. The two largest parties — the DUP and Sinn Féin — agreed that the text of the recent Hillsborough agreement was:

"an affirmation of our shared belief in the importance of working together in a spirit of partnership to deliver success for the entire community."

We welcome that affirmation and ask the lead parties in the Executive to revisit the Programme for Government and the Budget, and we ask them to do so in a way that genuinely protects front line services, that is capable of stimulating economic activity and that will properly protect services for people who are vulnerable and those who are poor.

This is a take-note debate, so I am happy to note what we are debating. However, I wish that we were able to have a much deeper and more serious debate in the context of a solution that is fit for dealing with the problem that confronts us, rather than simply managing expenditure that was predetermined three years ago.

Mr Lunn: Like Mr Storey, I want to concentrate on the education budget, which I understand totals about £2 billion at present. Mervyn Storey has mentioned some figures, including the need to cut £52 million from resource spending, £22 million from capital expenditure and another £40 million to £70 million that departmental officials have identified.

The backlog in schools estate maintenance is around £240 million, towards which £30 million has been allocated in the coming year. If we had £240 million to spend on maintenance, how much of it would be used to sustain schools that would not exist at all in a properly constructed and properly run education system? I keep returning to the point and I know that we harp on about the cost of division, but, as Stephen Farry mentioned, division, waste and duplication are fundamental problems. I do not buy the Deloitte and Touche figures to which we used to refer, which put the total cost of division at between £1 billion and £1.5 billion. However, with the proper approach, the one area of expenditure about which something could

be done is the education budget, which is a substantial part of the overall spend.

The Education Committee has been asked to come up with its own ideas about how to meet efficiencies and cuts.

Unusually, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has something in common with the Minister of Education, because, when we want to spend money, he is very fond of asking us where we will take it from. The Minister of Education asked exactly the same question; she asked for the Committee's advice on how to engineer the efficiencies. However, as Mr Storey said, she has not given the Committee enough detail. As things stand, the Committee cannot make a real contribution to the debate.

2.00 pm

The problem is so much bigger. For example, the education and skills authority (ESA) appears to have hit the rocks. I know that we debated the matter a couple of weeks ago and that we will have another debate shortly; however, establishing the ESA was supposed to be part of the biggest rationalisation programme in the history of the education service. Although the only figure on the table was a saving of £20 million a year, with a fair wind, goodwill and co-operation from the Assembly, the reforms, including area-based planning, the sustainable schools policy and proper rationalisation of the schools estate, had the potential to do so much more.

If the potential savings from the education budget were to be coupled with the introduction of the dreaded water charges, I wonder how much of that £370 million deficit could be dealt with. I know that it cannot be done at a stroke, but savings are there to be made. Last week, I heard the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the radio, and, if he was not preparing the way for the incremental introduction of water charges, I must not have been listening carefully enough, because that is what it sounded like to me. It is about time that the Assembly put its head above the parapet to say that water charges are inevitable and must be introduced. The introduction of water charges is the biggest single issue on which we can deliver and which could make a difference.

The problem with education, as other Members said, is a root and branch one. It makes no sense to keep small schools open when they could be combined with others and when

the main obstacle to doing so is ideological, rather than financial. Oddly, the Minister of Education has proposed the withdrawal of funding from prep schools. That may not sound like a massive deal; however, instead of the Department of Education contributing £800 per pupil, it will potentially have to contribute £2,900 per pupil. Some people say that parents would probably pay the difference. I doubt that, and, if they do not, what will happen? Potentially, there will be an extra burden of 2,500 times £2,900. At a time when we are trying to save money in the Budget, a major ideological decision is being taken. We all have our views about the desirability of prep schools — some people say that they are elitist — but, in financial terms, the timing is not great. It is an argument for another day; such a decision does not need to be taken now.

Jennifer McCann argued for an all-Ireland economy, and other Members touched on that subject. The only thing that I would say about her suggestion is that it is not very well timed. Before this mandate, the Assembly discussed that topic on numerous occasions. I am not sure whether I support an all-Ireland economy, as such, but I seem to remember strenuous efforts being made to introduce a corporation tax here that would have been equivalent to the very beneficial rate in Dublin. Perhaps my recollection is wrong, but removing competition is an example of intelligent co-operation that could benefit this part of the world.

A lot of Members mentioned the regional rate. I completely agree with my party colleague who said earlier that a freeze on the regional rate is actually a cut, and this is the third year of that freeze. Again, we have to put our heads above the parapet and acknowledge that perhaps the financial levers that are under our control in this place need to be used.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I return to the matter of education. With a bit of common sense, massive savings can be made in the education budget. For instance, the ideology could be removed or the various systems could be rationalised. In the absence of ESA and of bringing forward sensible policies, the various sectors are just going their own way, and none more so than the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). For instance, in Larne, the CCMS has come to the conclusion that an entire school population

should be moved 18 miles up the coast, but if anybody else looked at that situation, they would probably not come to that conclusion. That sort of thing is happening because we do not have agreement on a properly constructed way forward. I believe that there could be considerable benefits and massive savings in the long term.

Mr Attwood: I will start by touching on a point that was made by Trevor Lunn. He said that Jennifer McCann's earlier comments in respect of North/South matters were not very well timed. In my view, and in the SDLP's view, Jennifer McCann's comments, and comments that I will make, are actually very well timed, and there is probably no better time for them to be made. I want to elaborate on that. I am not going to flatter the Minister with false praise, but the current Minister of Finance has taken a much more pragmatic approach to certain North/South matters than may have been the case with his predecessor.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is two people that you have ruined: her and me.
[Laughter.]

Mr Attwood: Mr Kinahan is next.

The current Minister has taken a much more pragmatic approach to issues. Without prejudice to whether or not the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) is in the best interests of the people of the Republic or of the North — we could have a debate about that — the current incumbent in the Ministry of Finance in the North took a pragmatic approach to dealing with his colleague in the South when it came to NAMA and its interests north of the border. At that time, and since, I have acknowledged and welcomed that, but I think that it sets a new standard for what should happen on a North/South basis.

I could make an argument that nationally minded people wish to share more fully in life in the rest of the island, and I could make an argument that unionist minded people should develop and deepen their relationship with the rest of the people of Ireland. However, for the purposes of the debate, and given that there are streams of North/South funding running through various Departments, I only want to make to the Minister a pragmatic argument in relation to North/South matters, mindful of the pragmatic approach that the current Minister has taken in relation to one or two such matters.

Some weeks ago, during another debate, I mentioned that a senior person in an economic agency in the North said that, when it came to North/South matters, the Governments in Dublin and Belfast had only 10 years to get it right. He added that if it was not got right, Dublin would lose out, but Belfast would lose out more. I cannot identify that person, but I will tell the Minister privately who it was. People should be aware that a big heavy hitter in respect of the economic development of this island offered the opinion that we have only 10 years to get it right.

I will explain what I believe that he meant. We are aware from the recent economic crisis that the pace of global change is fast and that the global market changes quickly and will continue to do so. Yesterday, someone on an RTÉ news programme talked about the fact that 3 billion people live south of the United States border, in Latin America. Many of the countries and people there are beginning to position themselves in the global market. We are aware of what is happening in China and in eastern countries.

The person added a further opinion that if there were 20 reasons for foreign direct investors to come to the Republic of Ireland 20 years ago, there now remains only one, and that is corporation tax. He said that foreign direct investment might not return to Ireland in the way that it came during the years of the Celtic tiger economy. That was one reason that he flagged up to explain that the world economy is changing and that Ireland's role in it is changing similarly. Clearly, the recession and businesses cutting costs will change the situation further.

He made the final observation that the business that he heads up and its global network did not have to locate any of its jobs in America, even though it is an American high-tech company — it happens to be Intel. He said that it could easily locate every one of its American jobs in a different economy, although it would not be Ireland. My point is, therefore, that where this island now sits in the global market is different to where it sat even a year or two ago and will be different in coming years.

I want to make that argument to the Minister in respect of those Estimates: unless the Assembly acknowledges that the island and its respective economies are now competing in that context and positions itself to deal with that context, it will not deal with issues that face

people, North and South, such as future job opportunities, welfare, and prosperity.

What is the answer with regard to the Budget and Supplementary Estimates?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I note the Member's acknowledgement that I have had contact with the Minister for Finance. That contact was made and will continue for the best of reasons. Will the Member accept that, when it comes to the Programme for Government and, indeed, to many spending decisions in Northern Ireland, the Department does not ignore the potential benefits of co-operation with the Government of the Irish Republic? Indeed, even during the current difficult economic circumstances, that Government acknowledged those benefits by spending on projects in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the picture that the Member paints of insularity is not a reflection of what happens in reality.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for that contribution. I am not saying that there is deep insularity when it comes to issues between the Dublin and Belfast Governments. The Minister rightly points out that the Irish Government saved by pulling back up to 3% of North/South funding, but they did not go after the core funding in chapter 6 of the National Development Plan. The benefits of that are beginning to emerge in the work on the road between Derry and Aughnacloy and the roads that go south from Newry. Therefore, my argument is not that there is deep insularity or that there is not some level of "North/Southerly" that is to the benefit of citizens in the North and South: my argument is that we are only scratching the surface. Given the wider argument that I have outlined on how the island positions itself in the global market; unless we get beyond scratching the surface and begin to drill down to where opportunities really exist, the man who told me in October 2009 that we have only 10 years to get North/South co-operation right may, ultimately, say that we failed to get it right. That is my point.

I make that point to the Minister because of what I said earlier. As the Minister said himself, he has, for the best of reasons, continued to have a working relationship with his colleague in Dublin. I think that, for the best of reasons, those working relationships need to develop around education; R&D; innovation, and bringing together talented people who have ideas so that we can ensure that those ideas

mature into something that will create work and opportunities for people, North and South. This is not rocket science; everybody seems to accept it as self-evident truth.

2.15 pm

In that context, one can deal with the issues that we need to deal with on an all-Ireland basis concerning education, R&D, innovation and the bringing together of people with talent, which is why the Irish Government are funding 100 PhDs in the North. They recognised that there was a talent pool here, in further and higher education, which they have been able to exploit and that brings benefit to the people of Ireland regardless of how the banks and governments mismanaged those opportunities. They created that argument, and they basically told the people in the North that they knew that the North understood the situation and that they were going to give us the opportunity for a bit of uplift. That uplift was the funding of 100 PhDs in the University of Ulster and Queen's University. To me, that is a little bit more than scratching the surface.

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

Mr Attwood: Sorry, Mr Speaker, I was not aware that I had only 10 minutes. That is the argument that I wanted to make. The continuation of such working relationships will begin to undo the damage that was done by partition. I rest my case.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I will speak briefly in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Ba mhaith liom labhairt mar Chathaoirleach an Choiste Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóilíochta. I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the spring Supplementary Estimates.

At its meeting on 4 February 2009, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee heard evidence from the Department on the spring Supplementary Estimates 2009-2010. During the evidence session with Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) officials, the Committee was updated on a range of adjustments affecting spending profiles as the year progressed. The Committee took an active scrutiny role throughout the 2009-2010 budgetary year. The Department briefed the Committee on its position prior to each

monitoring round and provided detailed written responses to queries raised by members. On all occasions, the Committee robustly challenged the Department to explain its reasons for making bids and for declaring reduced spending requirements when surrendering resources.

The Committee notes that the spring Supplementary Estimates for DCAL detail the plan to surrender £2.5 million in capital through the February monitoring round. That includes more than £700,000 in capital for a project to invest in health and safety for motorsport events. The Committee will continue to encourage the Department to maximise its spend and ensure that capital projects progress as quickly as possible.

The Committee remains of the view that the overall allocation to DCAL is inadequate. The Department is still suffering from the legacy of the past. The Government have consistently undervalued the contribution that sports and the arts make to all sectors of society, including health, the economy and tourism. On behalf of the Committee, I express my support for the motion.

Linked to that, and speaking as an individual, I will say that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure got its strategy document for sport through the Executive recently. The document is called 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sports and Physical Recreation, 2009-2010'. However, it appears that sport does not matter, if we are to base our conclusions on the fact that DCAL is handing back an unspent £2.5 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel. I emphasise that point because the Programme for Government contains a target of achieving 53% adult participation in sport and physical activity, which has to be taken seriously.

We have the Sport Matters strategy, and the Programme for Government contains a target of encouraging 53% of adults to participate in sport and physical activity. In the same breath, however, money is being handed back to DFP. There is considerable angst and annoyance in the community over projects that are ready to go. The Department knows all about those projects, yet that capital money was not directed to them. Community angst was evident at a meeting in Belfast last week at which many grass-roots sports clubs made that point.

As the Minister of Finance and Personnel is present, I want him to reflect on the importance of achieving that target in the Programme for

Government. I also question why capital money is being handed back when it could have been spent on projects that have planning permission or for which there are long-term leases on facilities, and where projects are well advanced through community fund-raising. That is a real issue, to which a response is needed.

I suggest that the cake for the arts is not big enough and needs to be enlarged. We talk about dividing up the cake between the professional arts and the pursuit of excellence on the one hand and community-based arts projects on the other hand. A focused look must be taken at the need to increase the overall size of the funding cake for the arts.

Some discussion has been had on the merits, or otherwise, of a single-island economic approach. The Minister is saying that there is a considerable amount of activity in that area, and I welcome that activity. Not only does that approach make sense but it saves money and acts as a stimulus for investment. For example, the A5/N2 road project is capturing the imagination of the construction industry and engineers, and it is opening up roads to opportunities in the north-west of the island. That is a good example of that type of co-operation. The Minister is familiar with the road to Larne and has said that he would enjoy an extra few minutes in bed each morning. With prudent spending, we could achieve that outcome.

There is huge scope for achieving a closer working relationship between Letterkenny General Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital. The list of areas of health co-operation could easily be enlarged to meet the needs of the north-west population. We could look at acute-service provision and at cancer care and treatment. We could also look at the work of Cooperation and Working Together, a partnership project that considers all cross-border collaborative projects. Cooperation and Working Together needs greater funding, and that funding could be mainstreamed. We want to avoid duplication of spending and we want to maximise available resources. I wish Minister Wilson and Minister Lenihan well in their regular and important discussions.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. When we return to the debate after Question Time, Mr Fred Cobain will be the next Member called to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

North/South Ministerial Council

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the time, venue and agenda items for the next plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council.

(AQO 778/10)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in plenary format is scheduled to be held in June or July. The meeting will be hosted by the Irish Government, and arrangements for the meeting, including the precise date, the venue and the agenda, are on their way. Once the arrangements have been agreed, the Executive and the Assembly will be informed.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the First Minister for his short answer. Does he agree with me that given the review of the North/South bodies, particularly the North/South parliamentary forum, the consultative forum, and other outstanding matters from the St Andrews Agreement and the recent Hillsborough agreement, it would be good to have all those matters concluded before the next plenary session is due to take place?

The First Minister: I note the willingness of the Member from North Belfast to conclude all the outstanding matters from the St Andrews Agreement. I am sure that that includes the proper method for electing the First Minister, the efficiency panel and the standing secretariat for the east-west arrangements. I hope that the enthusiasm of her colleagues will match hers in ensuring that all those matters are dealt with.

Mr Kennedy: Will the First Minister give his assessment of any possible additional expenditure structures or increased role planned for the North/South bodies as a result of the Hillsborough Castle negotiation between his party and Sinn Féin?

The First Minister: I am sure that I can rely on the support of the Member for Newry and

Armagh for the proposals contained in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. I am sure that he will be canvassing support among his party colleagues. He will recognise that three working groups have been set up with specific responsibilities. The first one is to improve the way that the Executive operate, the second deals with outstanding Executive issues, and the third, which he refers to, deals with matters that are outstanding from the St Andrews Agreement. That agreement, of course, was an agreement between two Governments, and there are various levels of commitment to the outstanding matters. Those will be codified, and we will look to see what progress has been made on those issues and what further progress can be made.

Expenditure on North/South institutions and bodies is subject to the same kind of efficiencies that we are operating under in our Departments. Ensuring that those savings are made is as much a matter for the Government of the Irish Republic as it is for us.

Mr I McCrea: Does the First Minister agree that any move to create an all-Ireland consultative forum should at least be put on hold pending the outcome of the review of the Civic Forum?

The First Minister: First of all, I do not think that too many of us, when we are walking down the street, have people coming up to us and asking us what has happened to the Civic Forum or the all-Ireland civic forum. I have not once been asked about either outside of the political arena. When dealing with issues like that, one has to take into account the element of cost. If we are going to be spending money on such institutions, we have to remember that we will be taking it away from health, education, housing, the environment and all the other issues that are important to us. We must look at our priorities in such matters and determine where our funds are best spent, and whether they provide the best value for money.

As far as the Civic Forum is concerned, we have had a very useful engagement with civic society. The deputy First Minister and I have invited people to provide input on the economy as part of a cross-sectoral body, and we have found their input very valuable. In those circumstances, they are willing to do it without charge, which might be a model to follow.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that if they want to ask a supplementary question, they must continually rise in their place.

Mr Attwood: I rose to my feet two or three times, so I decided not to do so on the fourth occasion, Mr Speaker.

Given the recession, the need for the island to compete in a global market, and future budgetary constraints, is there an argument that the review of the North/South implementation bodies should be accelerated? Is that not preferable to a further six-month delay until the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in July 2010 and further uncertainty thereafter about what the two Governments might do with the recommendations that arise from that review?

The First Minister: A working group will consider any outstanding matters from St Andrews, and Mr Attwood's party colleague will have an input into that. Ultimately, the Assembly will have to make a determination on the establishment of any new bodies. The Member asked whether there is an argument for the review to be accelerated. There is such an argument, but it may not be a particularly good one.

OFMDFM: Legislative Proposals

2. **Mr McFarland** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many legislative policy proposals or draft Bills are with their Department for clearance; and to explain any backlog. (AQO 779/10)

The First Minister: At present, 17 papers concerning legislative proposals by Ministers are under consideration for inclusion on the agenda of future meetings of the Executive. As we explained previously to the Assembly, Executive business is a continuous process of consultation and agreement on draft papers that are circulated by individual Ministers. Therefore, there will always be Executive papers at various stages of consideration, the length of which will be determined by a number of factors, including the time needed to consider the often complex and sensitive issues and proposals from their colleagues.

As First Minister and deputy First Minister, we are required by the ministerial code to seek to ensure that decisions that are made by the Executive Committee are reached by consensus. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to seek the formal agreement of the Executive while issues of concern remain outstanding at the

consultation stage. Although it is, therefore, misleading to refer to a "backlog", we are committed to reviewing the operation of the Executive's procedures to secure improvement in effectiveness where it is possible to do so.

Members will be aware that in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, we stated our intention to seek the agreement of the Executive to set up a working group, chaired by Ministers Sir Reg Empey and Margaret Ritchie, to examine how the Executive might function better and how delivery might be improved. We have now done that, and the Executive gave their agreement to that proposal at last Thursday's meeting. We are grateful to Ministers Empey and Ritchie for each agreeing to undertake the role of co-chairperson. The other members of the working group will be Caitríona Ruane, the Minister of Education, and Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

The working group will examine the functions and delivery of the Executive Committee and seek to identify steps that might contribute to new and improved processes. It will then make its recommendations to the Executive. The joint chairpersons are keen for the working group to start work as soon as possible.

In addition, in accordance with the proposals that are set out in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, the Executive agreed that the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) will chair a working group involving all the parties in the Executive to identify Executive papers and decisions that are still pending. That group will provide a report to the Executive detailing the level of progress that has been made on each outstanding matter, and it will make recommendations on whether and how progress can be made on any and all outstanding matters by the end of this month. That will include a programme of work detailing how any remaining issues will be resolved.

We hope that that work will be regarded as evidence of our complete commitment to co-operating in the development and maintenance of an efficient Executive that are fully responsive to the needs of the community and prepared to deal with the challenges that face them.

Mr McFarland: I thank the First Minister for his answer. What examination has been made of the financial impact of the logjam? What likely

impact has the logjam had on departmental budgets?

The First Minister: The Member is sitting in the far corner of the Chamber, but I thought that he might at least have heard that there is no “logjam”, as he twice described it in his supplementary question. Of the 17 legislative proposals in the system, 10 arrived in the past two calendar months and are, therefore, part of an ongoing process of consideration by the Executive.

As far as the financial implications are concerned, I have found, often to my cost, that most legislation ends up costing money. Therefore, the implications are that we have saved money by what the Member describes as a logjam but I would describe as us attempting to get consensus between Executive parties before bringing issues to the Executive table.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire.

First, will the First Minister outline the Executive's legislation programme with respect to upcoming priorities? Secondly, I invite the First Minister to acknowledge and congratulate Cookstown Fr Rocks GFC on winning the all-Ireland intermediate club final in Croke Park yesterday.

The First Minister: I am sure that the Member has no territorial interest to declare in the latter matter.

The Executive's programme is set out in the Programme for Government, which the Member voted for and will, therefore, know thoroughly without having to ask me to outline it. There are around another 30 pieces of legislation that Ministers are to bring forward to the Assembly, which will take us beyond the legislative programme that our predecessors had during their period in office. That indicates that all our Ministers are fully involved in attempting to bring forward legislation that helps our constituents collectively.

Mr Hamilton: The initial question started an unhealthy concentration on what has not been done, and the supplementary questions continued that. Will the First Minister outline how many Executive papers have passed, as opposed to those that have not, at this stage?

The First Minister: I am always pleased to get questions such as this, and it just so happens that I have some figures to hand. At the 61

Executive meetings since the restoration of devolution in 2007, 493 papers have been considered. In addition, 31 papers have been processed through the urgent processes that we have as an Executive. The Executive have, therefore, taken a total of 524 decisions. That compares very favourably with the number of decisions taken during the last Administration when only 320 papers were cleared. We are, therefore, well on our way to being twice as good as our predecessors.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that all mobile phones must be switched off.

Mr Ford: I heard the First Minister say that legislation frequently costs money and that he was, therefore, pleased that legislation was not going through. What is the status of his Department's attitude to the ESA Bill, which deals with much-needed educational reforms, and which appears to be costing money by not being implemented, and the local government boundaries Order, which appears to be holding up the review of public administration process for local councils at significant cost.

The First Minister: I make it clear that I did not indicate that I was pleased that legislation was not going forward. I am one of those people who believes that less legislation can often be a good thing. Therefore, I do not judge an Executive on the number of Bills that they pass to see whether they are better or worse than their predecessors: that is why the figure that I gave to Simon Hamilton with respect to decisions rather than legislation is probably the more important one.

The two measures that Mr Ford is concerned about must be resolved. We have set up a working group under the Hillsborough Castle Agreement that will be chaired by the two junior Ministers. That group will identify all outstanding decisions and bring forward proposals for a programme that might resolve those matters. I, too, am keen to see those matters resolved satisfactorily. However, the deputy First Minister and I have a duty under the ministerial code to bring forward issues on which the Executive can reach consensus. That means, effectively, that nothing gets to the Executive table unless it is agreed by the deputy First Minister and me beforehand. That is why I think that the working group is so important, because issues that would not otherwise be part of a discussion at

the Executive can be as part of the ministerial working group that has been set up.

2.45 pm

Maze/Long Kesh Site

3. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQO 780/10)

The 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): In April 2009, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced that a development corporation would be established to take forward the redevelopment of the Maze/Long Kesh site, and a draft statutory rule has been prepared to create the Maze/Long Kesh development corporation. I am pleased to note that on 25 November 2009, the OFMDFM Committee progressed the draft statutory rule to the Assembly for debate. That debate will be scheduled as soon as possible.

In parallel, the Maze/Long Kesh programme delivery unit continues to prepare the site for potential future development, and in December, it hosted an initial focus group with a number of internationally renowned experts from the British Urban Regeneration Association. Realising the full economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the Maze/Long Kesh will provide us with a rare or, even, unique opportunity that transcends party politics, helps to revive key sectors of our economy in these difficult times and delivers benefit to the whole community. Support for the redevelopment of the site will attract investors, help the construction and tourism industries and, importantly, help to create a significant number of jobs.

Mr Lunn: I thank the junior Minister for his answer, which effectively means that apart from setting up a corporation and a delivery unit, nothing has happened. That has been the case for several years and, as a result, tremendous opportunities have been lost.

Can the First Minister or the junior Minister tell me whether they consider the absence of the stadium proposal, which appears to have been discounted, to be a serious drawback? It would have entailed a major anchor tenant being on

the site and, without that, the development of the site may well be inhibited. Also —

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

Mr Lunn: I am halfway through it. *[Laughter.]*

Does the First Minister think that, in the absence of such an anchor tenant, the infrastructural costs may be too much?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I realise that the Member is a representative of the Lisburn area and, as such, has a vested interest in the site. Perhaps not a “vested” interest; it was wrong for me to say that and I apologise. The Member has an interest for his constituency in seeing the development take place. However, such is the potential scale of the development, it will have an impact not only on the immediate area, but on Northern Ireland and, indeed, beyond.

The Member’s question conveys a sense of frustration at things not moving forward, as he perceives it. However, it is estimated that the development corporation will be operational within six months of the Assembly’s approval of the motion to establish it and the Department of Finance and Personnel’s approval of the business case. However, there will be no loss of impetus, because the programme delivery unit is continuing with remediation work at the site and has commissioned site condition surveys and an infrastructure needs analysis to gain open access to the site and to make contact with future potential developers.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to be more focused in their questions, as far as possible.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra, agus tá ceist agam air.

I am sure that the junior Minister and, hopefully, the First Minister welcome last week’s decision by their Executive colleague Edwin Poots to maintain the listed building status of the preserved buildings at the jail. Although I know that there are other proposals, will the development corporation, when it is set up, make the proposals involving the conflict transformation centre and the preserved buildings part of any development of that site?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): It is implicit in the Member’s question that he is sensitive to concerns in the wider community about the

potential of the peace-building and conflict resolution centre to become a shrine. In response to a similar question in the House from my colleague Mr McCausland, the deputy First Minister said:

"The important thing for me is that we do not have a shrine at the Long Kesh site." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 34, p239, col 2].

In answer to a supplementary question from Mr Ford on the same issue and on the same day, the deputy First Minister said:

"The Member referred to those who wish to see a shrine at Long Kesh; I do not know anybody who has argued for a shrine at Long Kesh. I have heard people from the unionist persuasion articulate a view that that is what republicans want. Let me state here and now: that is not what republicans want." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 34, p240, col 1].

Those are the words of the deputy First Minister on the subject.

Mrs D Kelly: The junior Minister mentioned the potential for job creation in the development of the site. Will he confirm whether there will be any proposals to employ apprentices and the long-term unemployed?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for her question, which is on a subject that is particularly dear to my heart. I have a great belief in the need to train apprentices. Northern Ireland's economy will be underpinned by a skilled workforce at all levels, but particularly at an apprenticeship level.

As we go forward to create the development corporation, we should seek to ensure that apprenticeship provision is included. I anticipate that the site will have a development life of around 20 years. As contracts are handed out, I hope that, where it is legally possible, some provision for apprenticeship training will be built into them.

I was looking at apprenticeship numbers with my colleague Lord Browne today. I am extremely concerned about the current programme-led apprenticeship arrangements, because a maximum of only 50% of apprentices ever get work experience. A young man or woman going into a programme-led apprenticeship may spend all his or her time in a college environment. What does that tell you about producing a skilled workforce for the future? Young people need the opportunity to have a college education

for their vocation, but they also need the experience of a workplace situation or, preferably, employment. That will be necessary to produce quality apprenticeships in the future. I am not too far removed from the thought that we should do all that we can in the development corporation to ensure that opportunities are presented.

OFMDFM: Efficiencies

4. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what impact administrative efficiencies will have on staff within their Department; and how many posts will be affected. (AQO 781/10)

The First Minister: In the Budget for 2008-2011, the Executive agreed that Departments would deliver 5% per annum in administration efficiency savings over the years 2008-09 to 2010-11. OFMDFM is required to deliver £2 million in efficiency savings across the three years. Efficiency savings in OFMDFM are being delivered through an improvement in, and a refocusing of, the delivery of programmes and functions. Those measures will result in a reduction of approximately 51 full-time equivalent posts. The staffing reductions will be achieved through the redeployment of staff within the Northern Ireland Civil Service and through the suppression of vacant posts.

Mr Paisley Jnr: What impact will the 51-post reduction have on the complexion of the Department? How will that reduction make the Department's staffing arrangements compare with those under the previous Administration? The First Minister previously said the Department's staffing arrangements were twice as good as they had been under the previous Administration, but I am sure that he will agree that this will mean that they are three times as good.

The First Minister: I remember that, at the beginning of this Assembly term, we were chided about the number of people who worked in OFMDFM equalling that in the White House and about how it was double that in Downing Street or the Republic. Of course, the reality was somewhat different. When the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP were in OFMDFM, there were 420 members of staff in that Department. The number reduced to 408 by September 2007 and by April 2010, we will have reduced it to 344. The figures rose steeply during the previous Administration but are coming down steeply under this Administration. Only 80 of those staff are

involved directly with the deputy First Minister and I compared with the 3,000 that have a similar role in Washington or the hundreds that are available in Dublin and London.

Mr K Robinson: I listened with some amusement to the First Minister's response. However, will he tell us how many members of staff are employed in OFMDFM primarily to manage the central co-ordination of government? Given the recent Hillsborough accord, does he recognise the need to increase the numbers to handle the reversal of the dysfunctionality of that Department?

The First Minister: The Member should have felt embarrassment, not amusement, when he heard the answer to the previous question. I hope that he is pleased that we are getting the same with less. Indeed, if we can get more with less, that will be even better. At the minute, 81 staff equivalent positions are held by those with responsibility for what he describes as the central administration.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Will the First Minister assure us that no front line services will be affected by the efficiency costs in the Department?

The First Minister: The priority for the deputy First Minister and me is to protect front line services; I hope that all Ministers have the same priority. Money is tight, and efficiency is required. However, we must ensure that we cut out waste and bureaucracy and protect front line services.

Social Justice Commission

5. **Dr McDonnell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if they support the establishment of an independent social justice commission to combat poverty and promote social justice for vulnerable members of the community. (AQO 782/10)

The First Minister: The principle of combating poverty and the concept of fairness and equality of opportunity for all members of society, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised, are integral aspects of our existing Programme for Government and will remain so as we move forward.

A range of independent structures such as the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the Children's Commissioner

exist in Northern Ireland, and we plan to establish an office of the commissioner for older people as soon as possible. Those bodies collectively promote rights and equality of opportunity for all and provide a strong framework of independent advice, advocacy and investigation. In addition, the introduction of child poverty legislation across the United Kingdom will further enhance those structures and will create a child poverty commission, which will be independent of government, with a statutory requirement to seek its advice when preparing a child poverty strategy. Therefore, we have no plans to introduce another commission as the Member suggests.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the First Minister for his answer. He is aware that extensive social capital is invested in Churches, faith-based groups and their volunteers. What is his assessment of Churches' potential to play a key role in combating poverty and promoting social justice in the communities that they serve?

The First Minister: The Member is right to draw attention to the considerable work that is carried out by Churches and other charitable organisations in Northern Ireland. They have a wealth of committed experience that we would do well to partner and encourage. From our private conversations, he will know that I believe that government has a role to examine the funding that the Executive will receive from obsolete bank accounts. That is a perfect channel to provide funds to help such organisations.

3.00 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Common Agricultural Policy

1. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what representations her Department has made to DEFRA on the reform of the common agricultural policy. (AQO 749/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. There is no doubting the importance of the upcoming negotiations on the future of the common agricultural policy

(CAP). A number of crucial issues are up for discussion, particularly the size of the CAP budget and the future basis for the single farm payment.

The debate is just beginning, and the European Commission is expected to publish a paper in autumn 2010 that will outline its thinking. Legislative proposals will follow in 2011, with the aim of reaching agreement in 2012. A date is currently being sought for a meeting of the devolved Ministers and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and CAP reform will be a priority issue on the agenda of that meeting.

DEFRA is well aware of the fact that the other devolved Ministers and I do not share its vision for future CAP reform, particularly its suggestion that the single farm payment be phased out. The proposed meeting will provide another opportunity to make the case for the continuance of the single farm payment. I should add that CAP reform is a regular item on the agenda of meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. I will not deny that it will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to shift the British Government on that issue, but I am determined that the views of the agriculture sector in the North will be properly represented in the upcoming debate. That is why I am considering making my own submission to the European Commission when the CAP reform proposals emerge.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her response. However, will she make an assessment of the likely impact that any changes will have on local farmers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Thankfully, the British Government's position is not the position of the majority of EU member states. If we moved away from the single farm payment, farm incomes would be negative, which, ultimately, could destroy our farming industry in its entirety.

Mr Kinahan: What discussions has the Minister held with her colleagues in Scotland and Wales on the common agricultural policy? Furthermore, what communication has she had with the three Northern Ireland MEPs on the future of the policy post 2013?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have had a number of discussions with our three MEPs and the other devolved Ministers, as well as the Minister

for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South of Ireland, Brendan Smith. CAP reform is a standing item on the agendas for those discussions, because we are all keen to hear one another's points of view, share those views and build our proposals for CAP reform. The matter comes up frequently during meetings with the people that the Member mentioned. I do not see any difference between now and 2013; if anything, the issue will have more importance on the agenda.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What are the benefits of North/South co-operation for future CAP reform?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The CAP affects farmers across Ireland, so it makes sense for our Departments to co-operate closely on the issue. Farmers, North and South, have common interests; therefore, I am of the view that we should have frequent discussions about our policy approach. There are opportunities to collaborate on agreed issues when trying to influence the European Commission's position, and I intend to use every avenue that is available to me to get the best deal for farmers in the North.

Mr Ford: The Minister has correctly outlined the difficulty of getting DEFRA to recognise the needs of the more marginal areas of the UK, and we welcome the co-operation that she has established with Dublin, Edinburgh and Cardiff. Has she had any direct contacts with the European Parliament, and, specifically, with George Lyon MEP, given his current role in supervising the review from the parliamentary perspective, in order to build the widest possible coalition?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: No. Those meetings will be ongoing as the debate emerges, but I have not spoken to George Lyon about the issue. I keep in close contact with the European Commission, but, obviously, given the implications of co-decision, the role of MEPs becomes more important.

Disadvantage and Inequality

2. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department is doing to tackle disadvantage and inequality. (AQO 750/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Go raibh maith agat, a

Cheann Comhairle. Tackling disadvantage and inequality is a key aspect of ongoing work in the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), directly through specific anti-poverty and deprivation-focused interventions, and, indirectly, by ensuring that policy proposals or existing policy reviews include action to determine the current level of inequalities that may exist and establish the extent to which any such inequalities can be addressed. The rural development programme allocated £50 million through axis 3 quality-of-life funding on the basis of deprivation and population. That will have a significant impact on addressing disadvantage in the most deprived rural areas.

The Programme for Government (PFG) tasked DARD with meeting a target to bring forward a £10.4 million package of actions to address rural poverty and social exclusion across the Budget years 2008-09 and 2010-11. Through the anti-poverty and social inclusion programme, a range of interventions is under way to address the key priorities of rural life: childcare; fuel poverty; transport and access; community development; and specific local and regional poverty and exclusion issues.

In tranche two of the farm modernisation programme, under axis 2 of the rural development programme, I have proposed that efforts to tackle disadvantage be targeted at less-favoured areas, where the need for modernisation is greatest, to help to enable successful applicants to use the grant to become, or to remain, competitive while working in a very challenging environment. Under the less-favoured area compensatory allowance (LFACA) scheme in axis 2 of the rural development programme, approximately 13,500 claimants received payments in each of the past three years. It is my hope that all those initiatives will play an important role in tackling disadvantage and inequality.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about tackling disadvantage; it is important to tackle disadvantage as well as inequality. The Minister gave some details in her response, but can she go into a little more detail on the specific actions that DARD has taken to address inequality?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: When considering policy

proposals or reviewing existing policies, business areas are required to take action to find out the level and extent of inequality that exists. Equality screening is the first step in the process, and it enables business areas to identify the policies, actions or duties that are likely to have a significant impact on equality of opportunity in one or more of the nine groups covered by section 75.

If, during the screening process, it becomes apparent that there are likely to be significant inequalities, an equality impact assessment (EQIA) is carried out. DARD business areas have carried out a number of EQIAs in recent years, including assessments of the rural development programme, DARD Direct, the rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework, and the review of the LFACA scheme.

Equality monitoring is necessary under section 75. The duties under that section place an onus on DARD business areas to put systems in place to monitor the impact of their policies on the promotion of equality. Monitoring for adverse impact following the outcome of EQIAs helps to ensure that adverse impacts and inequalities are identified and dealt with and that useful information is available for section 75 screening purposes.

DARD has recently set up an equality monitoring project team, which includes representatives from all business areas. The team has been authorised by the top management group (TMG), and a senior responsible officer (SRO) has been identified. The equality branch will guide the project team, which will focus on co-ordinating and monitoring existing data across business areas and will work to identify any gaps in data. That project will be carried forward in 2010.

Mr Campbell: The Minister described tackling inequality as a “key aspect” of her considerations. Will she look at the views of people in the farming community in a similar light, and will she consider them to be a key aspect when they review the outworkings of her farm modernisation programme? Will she take their views into account on the basis of equality?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am sure that the Member recognises that I am always in listening mode when it comes to farmers. As the next question, question 3, deals specifically with farm modernisation, I will respond to the Member's question when I answer it.

Mrs M Bradley: How much of the £10 million budget to address rural poverty has been spent, and how was it spent? What targets are in place so that we can measure whether people will really benefit from the money?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The £10 million has been spent on a range of areas. Tackling disadvantage, poverty and social exclusion are key elements of the Department's ongoing anti-poverty and social inclusion work. As I said, that covers five priorities: rural childcare; rural fuel poverty; rural transport and access issues; rural community development; and a more general rural challenge fund.

Working in conjunction with the Department for Social Development, £630,000 has been directed towards assisting rural homes through the warm homes scheme and an insulation scheme for hard-to-heat rural homes. In excess of 800 rural homes have benefited from that work. Through a partnership with Minister Murphy's Department, the Department for Regional Development (DRD), we have allocated £390,000, the majority of which has been spent on rural transport schemes and in conjunction with DRD's dial-a-lift service.

We have also been working with the Public Health Agency to implement a regional project aimed at maximising access to services, benefits and grants uptake for rural dwellers. It is envisaged that 4,200 rural dwellers across the 88 most-deprived rural wards will benefit from that project.

I will write to the Member with the other specifics of her question. However, that is an example of some of the areas on which money has been spent and some of the people who have benefited from it.

Farm Modernisation Programme

3. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the proposals for the second round of the farm modernisation programme will be equality proofed. (AQO 751/10)

7. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the use of land classification as a criterion to select farmers under the farm modernisation

programme; and whether this could discriminate against farmers living in lowland areas. (AQO 755/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 7 together.

An equality impact assessment has already been completed for the rural development programme for 2007-2013. The EQIA covered the axis 1 measures, which include farm modernisation. We continually monitor participation in DARD programmes through the analysis of equality monitoring questionnaires, which are issued to all projects supported by the rural development programme, and through the data on individual application forms.

The promotion of equality of opportunity requires proactive measures to secure equality of opportunity among the groups identified in section 75. The equality duty should not inhibit action to counter disadvantage among certain sections of society. I am keen that this tranche should target disadvantage by focusing on businesses that are situated in a less-favoured area, where the need for modernisation is great.

LFAs and, in particular, severely disadvantaged areas are dominated by small farms, and the gap in the average farm business size between farms there and those in the lowlands has widened over the past 20 years. Farmers in those areas face permanent hardship because of poor agricultural conditions, and sustaining agricultural activity in less-favoured areas will be difficult without various kinds of targeted support. That is why there are scores for applicants from disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged areas to enable those who are successful to use the grant to help them to become, or remain, competitive while working in a challenging environment.

Those farms are in the margins of viability, and I am sure that the Member will share my view that we must do all that we can to ensure that farming communities in such harsh environments are not lost.

Mr McCallister: I draw Members' attention to the Register of Members' Interests.

I accept that the Minister's reply outlined that the rural development programme was equality proofed. However, does she accept that the

method that she has chosen for the next tranche of the farm modernisation programme has not been equality proofed? As a lowland farmer, I do not have a mission of meeting any of those criteria. There is absolutely no prospect of thousands of other lowland farmers meeting those criteria because they discriminate severely against people who farm in lowland areas.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We should bear in mind that 70% of farms are in disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged areas and that some schemes, by dint of geographical and topographical conditions, are better suited to some areas than others.

I do not apologise for bringing forward these proposals. I always listen, and I will take views from today's questions. However, it is important to tackle disadvantage and inequality. The Member will be aware that those inequalities exist in disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged areas.

Dr W McCrea: I am sure that the Minister is aware that major concerns were expressed at a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development that European money has been taken from lowland farmers, and they will now be discriminated against and not given an equal opportunity to apply for the farm modernisation programme. Surely that is deliberate discrimination, and, indeed, could be basically sectarian.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member will understand that, as a Minister, I have a duty to target objective need. For anyone who does not understand the issue, he makes an allegation that assumes that lowland farmers pay voluntary modulation and upland farmers do not. That is not the case; 70% of our farmers are in disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged areas, and all farmers pay voluntary modulation. However, in the past, some schemes have benefited only farmers in rural areas, and to tackle disadvantage and inequality, I must be proactive.

3.15 pm

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that all Departments have a responsibility to tackle inequalities by implementing section 75? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Absolutely; that is what I am doing. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware of concerns about the lack of consultation on the new method of application? Will she be a wee bit more specific in detailing what her Department has done to devise a more equitable method of disbursing the funding?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My officials met the Ulster Farmers' Union on 24 June 2009, the Assembly's Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on 30 June 2009 and the Agricultural Producers' Association on 11 July 2009. At each meeting, the views of the industry representatives were sought to ensure that the farm modernisation programme is targeted at the projects that are most able to demonstrate modernisation. Those include the prioritisation of investment areas, the format of applications, maximum grant rate or variations, maximum grant amount and procurement methodology.

As the Member is aware, the European Commission took an interest in the selection criteria following the first-come, first-served approach to the first tranche. On 21 December 2009, we met the European Commission to inform it of our plans for the next tranche of the farm modernisation programme. The Commission is clear that its role is only to advise member states on the need for clear and transparent selection criteria. It does not have the legislative competence to approve selection criteria. The Commission raised no objection to our proposals, and it was reassured by the detailed selection process that we proposed to distinguish between applications in the second tranche.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

**Dog Control/
Dangerous Dogs Legislation**

5. Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the development of dog control legislation. (AQO 753/10)

15. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what additional responsibilities will be placed on local councils under the current proposals to amend the dangerous dogs legislation. (AQO 763/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 15 together.

Public consultation on proposals for changes to dog control legislation ended on 1 February 2010. The aim of those proposals was to protect people from dog attacks and to encourage and promote responsible dog ownership. The Department received a significant number of responses to the proposals. I wish to take this opportunity to thank all the individuals and organisations who took the time to respond. In particular, I thank Mr George Robinson for his extremely supportive response. I am considering all the detailed responses carefully and will take them on board in finalising the policy.

My officials will meet the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development tomorrow to discuss the responses, and that will enable me to take account of the Committee's views. When the policy is finalised, I will seek the Executive's agreement to a new dog control Bill with the aim of introducing it to the Assembly before the summer recess. The proposals sought to provide councils with new tools, such as new powers for wardens to put conditions on the licences of problem dogs and increased resources to assist them in their statutory duty under the Dogs Order 1983. However, the proposals do not seek to place additional statutory responsibilities on councils.

The existing legislation bans certain types of dog, such as pit bull terriers. The legislation that came into force in 2001 allows the owner of a prohibited type of dog which is subject to a destruction order issued by a magistrate to apply to a council for an exemption from the ban. As the available exemptions can be applied for only in the context of legal proceedings, during which dogs are seized and kept in pounds, the welfare of the dog concerned may suffer, and ratepayers may face a sizeable cost burden. An initial review of the consultation responses appears to show that many welfare organisations welcome the proposal to clarify existing legislation and allow councils, in exceptional circumstances, to exempt such dogs before recourse to a resident magistrate.

However, many councils expressed concerns about the proposal. It was their view that any decision to exempt a banned dog from destruction should be taken in the courts. Councils and other stakeholders put forward a range of proposals on how the complex issue might be addressed, and I will consider those fully before finalising my policy.

Mr F McCann: The Minister went on to answer the supplementary question that I was going to ask about what discussion she has had with councils.

Mr G Robinson: To avoid loopholes and ensure enforcement, will the Minister ensure that the legislation clearly defines the responsibilities of local district councils?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will work closely with local government and councils, because they are the people who will enforce the legislation. To that end, their views were among the first that I sought in formulating the new legislation. We need to move away from the previous legislation, which was knee-jerk, rushed through and, as a result, not fit for purpose. This time, we have taken the time to talk to councils and all stakeholders to get the best legislation that is workable and with which councils are happy.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister detail what assistance her Department is likely to provide to local councils to assist them with their new responsibility under the dog control regulations?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Is the Member asking about financial assistance? At this stage, some of our proposals are about licensing. Although we do not propose to move to a full cost recovery system, additional funds will be available. Assistance is always available. We have a dedicated team working on this legislation, and it is always at the end of the phone. If questions need to be answered or if clarification of issues is sought, councils can rely on our assistance. Some financial assistance will be forthcoming from the increase in the licence fee. However, those increases are intended not to facilitate cost recovery but to promote responsible dog ownership.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that it is most important that the dog licence fee is not set at a level that will discourage people from registering their dogs? That would undo

a lot of the good work that has been carried out over the years and has led, for example, to a reduction in sheep worrying. How will the Minister ensure that councils do not charge outrageous fees for dog licences?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We have been in listening mode on the issue. We revised our original proposals downwards to ensure that people were not put off keeping a dog. It is important to stress that responsible dog owners already benefit from the service provided by councils and will continue to do so. It is hoped that the new regime will make things easier for people.

Even with the best will in the world, dogs will stray. When it happens, we want people to get their dogs back with the minimum of fuss. However, a mechanism to control stray dogs that are a nuisance to other people or other dogs is also needed. My proposals will achieve that. Responsible dog owners should not be held responsible for irresponsible dog owners. I am sorry: saying the word “responsible” three times in one sentence is not good grammar. I also propose to consult on increased penalties for offences, including licensing infringements, to reinforce the need for responsible — there I go again — dog ownership.

Rural Development Programme

6. **Mr O’Loan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the current stage of the implementation plans for the seven joint council committees under axis 3 of the rural development programme. (AQO 754/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Axis 3 of the rural development programme is delivered on behalf of my Department by seven joint council clusters, each in partnership with a local action group. As part of the delivery arrangements, each joint council committee (JCC) has agreed an implementation plan with the Department for its individual local development strategy, which includes an integral financial plan. To date, all JCCs have opened calls for applications under most measures. So far, they have agreed 298 applications for grant aid worth £8.2 million, which were assessed by local action groups. The Department, in consultation with the joint council committee administration units, closely monitors progress and applications received. Following the end of this financial year, the Department plans

to carry out a comprehensive review of the implementation plans against progress and in conjunction with the JCCs.

Mr O’Loan: Despite what the Minister says, there is a widespread feeling that the axis 3 funding has not been forthcoming. Will she explain what percentage of payments has been made? Is my perception that there are difficulties in the match funding from her Department accurate?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I accept that the delivery mechanisms and delivery areas for axis 3 funding are new and that, therefore, new and robust foundations had to be put in place for the funding to be delivered. That included animation of the new areas, competition and appointment of new local action groups and development of the new infrastructure, support and controls required to enable effective delivery. The JCCs implementing axis 3 have been opening calls throughout 2009 and, as I have said, about £8.2 million worth of grant aid has been approved for successful project sponsors.

The issuing of letters of offer has been delayed because of the large number of applications, the competitive nature of the open calls and the voluntary nature of local action group assessment panels. We took a bottom-up approach. Local action group panels are now nearing the completion of their assessments. The panels have done sterling work and have done really well, and the number of letters of offer that are being issued will increase shortly. I accept that there were a few teething problems, but they have been ironed out, and we will have excellent outcomes from the RDP.

Mr Brady: A Cheann Comhairle, the Minister has already answered my question to a certain degree. However, what steps are being taken to prevent a logjam of applications in future calls?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I hope that the greater familiarity of the LAGs with the assessment and operating rules, allied with shorter call windows, will substantially shorten the time between applications and letters of offer.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister ensure that all moneys, funding and resources will be equally spread out across the whole of the Province so that all areas benefit? Is it possible to quicken

the payments and ensure that those who apply get a quick turnaround?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Given that we are talking about only six of the nine counties, not all parts of the province will benefit. However, I take the Member's point: we want to ensure that money is spent across all six counties. However, going back to a previous point, the first £50 million of axis 3 of the rural development programme, which is entitled 'Improving the Quality of Life in Rural Areas and Diversification of the Rural Economy', was based on need. For areas where there has traditionally been more disadvantage and inequality, a scoring mechanism was put in place to ensure that the places that needed the money most received slightly more. Again, that is a new and welcome departure for this Department.

Mr McFarland: Has the Minister written any letters of support to individual applicants of axis 3 projects, particularly in the south west action for rural development (SWARD) council cluster? If she has, could that not be viewed as a conflict of interest?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The LAG makes the decision. It is a given that there are needs in each of those areas. I do not accept the Member's accusation. Anything that I have done has been done with propriety.

Mr Speaker: Mr Hilditch is not in his place for question 8.

Rural Development Programme

9. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her position on the future of the rural development programme. (AQO 757/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The rural development programme is an important element of my Department's strategy to support rural areas in the North. It provides support for a broad range of beneficiaries to improve the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry, improve the environment and countryside, improve the quality of life in rural areas and encourage the diversification of the rural economy. The value of the programme is approximately £500 million, of which to date over £100 million has been spent. My officials are actively engaged in the

development and implementation of the various schemes and measures in the programme. We are bidding for resources in which public expenditure is required to match the EU funding.

Although I am committed to ensuring that the current rural development programme progresses, as intended, to completion in 2015, the current economic climate and any future DARD budget plans mean that public expenditure in the programme will be subject to the same scrutiny as the rest of my Department's spending plans.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister consider giving a higher priority to improving forestry in the future phases of the rural development programme? Will she consider offering better payments to farmers who plant trees on their land?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member will be pleased to hear that we have already done that. We have increased the rates for forestry grants, and encouraging more people to plant trees is one of our PSA targets.

Mr Elliott: In the light of the ongoing rural development programme, will the Minister consider dropping voluntary modulation from farmers' expenses? That modulation is not voluntary at all; it is compulsory.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I agree with the point. Voluntary modulation is a bit of a misnomer. However, it preceded and predated me, so there is nothing that I can do about it.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Spring Supplementary Estimates: Supply Resolution for the 2010-11 Vote on Account

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £13,772,054,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,567,071,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2009-10 that was laid before the Assembly on 8 February 2010. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £6,197,971,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2011 and that resources, not exceeding £6,662,114,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2011 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2010-11 document that was laid before the Assembly on 8 February 2010. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Fred Cobain.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): As Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, I am pleased to contribute to the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates 2009-2010 and the Vote on Account 2010-11.

The Minister for Regional Development wrote to the Committee last week, setting out the main changes that will arise from the June, September and December 2008 monitoring rounds as he reflected on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2009-2010. Provision is included in the Department for Regional Development's spring Supplementary Estimates of up to £9 million for a possible allocation to the City of Derry Airport in the February monitoring round.

The Committee for Regional Development scrutinised the quarterly monitoring rounds in 2009-2010, and it responded to the Department on the specific bids and easements contained in each monitoring round return. The February monitoring round briefing from the Department stated that it was not submitting any bids in that round. I understand that the airport issue has arisen in the days since the DRD return was submitted to DFP, and I will seek clarification from the Department on the possible allocation of up to £9 million to the City of Derry Airport.

The Committee's monitoring round scrutiny work gives rise to an issue of strategic concern, and it is not just an issue for the Regional Development Committee: it cuts across and underpins the economic and social well-being of the whole economy and all of Northern Ireland's people. During monitoring rounds and in debates on the Budget and the Programme for Government, the Committee has raised the issue of the need to provide adequate and timely funding for structural maintenance programmes. We have spent 60% of what is needed for structural maintenance. It is fair to say that that shortfall might be absorbed in one financial year, but continuous underspending, which has been the

Department's norm over a prolonged period, affects the structural maintenance of minor roads, rural roads and motorways. The quality of our roads and infrastructure directly influences journey times and reliability, and it enhances or detracts from the tourism experience. It enables or hinders access to work, education and training opportunities, as well as cultural, sporting and leisure services. The quality of roads and infrastructure can have a multiplier effect on the local economy. It directly influences the competitiveness of Northern Ireland's businesses and can, directly or indirectly, support employment. Furthermore, the Committee has a well-rehearsed view that structural maintenance spending also has road safety implications.

Funding for structural maintenance must approach the levels set out in the recently published Snaith review. Professor Snaith recommended funding of £109 million per annum for structural maintenance and additional yearly allocations to address the £700 million backlog in structural maintenance. Each year of underspend contributes to that backlog. I reiterate the Committee's view that, in light of current budgetary pressures, it is no longer acceptable or prudent for the Department to rely on in-year monitoring to adequately fund structural maintenance programmes.

Mr Speaker: Fred Cobain should be recorded as having spoken as Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr A Maginness: The debate has been interesting. The first of a few general points that I want to make relates to monitoring rounds and the progress that, I believe, Departments have made in relation to their spend. There seems to have been a slow but progressive development in the Departments' budgetary discipline. Past overcalculations — deliberate or otherwise — by Departments of their individual needs have been reduced. Departments have adopted a much more sensible and forthright approach to calculating their spend. The culture of underspend has become less prevalent, and the greater financial discipline of Departments must be welcomed because, in the past, Departments provided unrealistic figures. That provides the Department of Finance and Personnel with a more realistic financial forecast of Departments' needs and the Administration's overall needs. However, less money in the monitoring rounds creates a problem, because there will be less

fat, so to speak, to flexibly address marginal pressures that arise in Departments or across government. Although that downside exists, on balance, it is a better way forward.

Members made interesting observations about fiscal powers for the Assembly. There was talk of tax-raising and tax-varying powers, which are good subjects to debate, and that debate should be encouraged. None of us should have a closed mind to taxation powers for the Assembly. At the moment, the range of locally held powers is very limited and is largely confined to the regional rate. The Assembly should be ambitious about trying to increase its fiscal powers, be they tax-varying or tax-raising powers.

With tax-raising powers comes the inevitable responsibility of increasing taxes, which would create problems with constituents and public opinion. However, there is a strong argument for corporation tax-varying powers. In 2006-07, prior to restoration of devolution in 2007, there was considerable debate on that subject, and a strong view was expressed that, in order to mirror the lower corporation tax rate in the Irish Republic, the rate for this region should be separated from the UK rate. That argument made a lot of sense, and it was backed up by eminent economists and financial thinkers, not least of whom was Sir George Quigley. In essence, Sir George argued strongly that the Irish Republic's experience demonstrated how Northern Ireland's ability to attract investment from the global economy's multinational powerhouses would be greatly enhanced by the ability to offer inward investors an attractive post-tax rate of return by radically reducing corporation tax. He suggested trading off a small part of our subvention from the Treasury for that tax flexibility, and, if other UK regions were to object, the principle could be extended elsewhere on similar terms. That measure would have signalled a promising new direction in public policy. However, we politicians did not fully address that argument. Therefore, at some stage in the near future, we should revisit that debate. Perhaps now, as we come out of a severe recession, is not the right time to do that. Nonetheless, it is important that we look at that argument and engage expert advice about it. The substance of Sir George Quigley's argument, which was about trading off a small part of the subvention to get such tax flexibility, is good and is worthy of consideration. If we are to progress as a region, we must have something that is attractive to foreign investors.

We also have to equalise the attractiveness of the region to investors with the attractiveness of the Irish Republic to investors. It is important that we attempt to equalise that so that foreign investors are encouraged to come here.

We also had the Barnett report, which points us in the right direction towards a high-value-added, export-driven approach to the economy. That is important.

Finally, another aspect that was raised today is the impending cuts that will inevitably follow the re-election of the Labour Government or the election of a Conservative Government. It really is a matter of degree, but there is no doubt that there will be severe spending cuts. Given that as a probability, we should prepare ourselves to deal with it. As a region, we depend very much on public expenditure, and, if that public expenditure has been used in the past as a shield to protect us, in the future it will be used as a sword to stab us if it is reduced significantly. Therefore, we must prepare ourselves as an Administration to deal with that. If we do not, we will do a grave disservice to all the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I urge the Government to look at the issue carefully and in detail and provide a plan to deal with such an approach by a future British Government.

I invite the Minister of Finance to consider in his response at least looking at a variation in taxation with particular reference to corporation tax, because I believe that that is key to the way forward.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment Committee's views on the 2009-2010 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2010-11 Vote on Account. The Committee considered the Department of the Environment's submission for the February monitoring round at the same time as it looked at the Department's proposals for meeting the revised expenditure plans. As I mentioned during last week's debate on the matter, the Committee recognised that the 11·3% cut that the Department is required to make is a tough challenge. I also mentioned that the Committee welcomed the Department's decision, albeit a late one, to address the ongoing pressures resulting from a reduction and change in the profile of planning applications by realigning the Planning Service in accordance with the level of fees that are now being received.

The Committee also welcomed the Department's approach of using a vacancy moratorium to reduce staff costs without resorting to redundancies, along with a range of proactive measures, such as reducing running costs and expenditure on consultancy. The Committee remains frustrated with the ongoing saga of e-PIC, but, as the £2·7 million required for its continuation was met in the December monitoring round, Committee members were relieved to hear that the above measures would meet the required savings and that the Department would not make any bids in the February monitoring round. In fact, as the Committee learned, the Department intends to surrender £1 million from the strategic waste infrastructure fund (SWIF) that had been allocated for use by the three waste management groups to carry out environmental impact assessments and placing options to secure sites for new facilities.

Those funds were reclassified from capital to current funding in the September monitoring round. As such, they are no longer ring-fenced, and if they are not utilised, they have to be surrendered to DFP. It now appears that the amount that the waste groups require for options is less than anticipated. That situation allows for some of the £1 million, but the rest will be required in the future if the Assembly is to meet its European waste management obligations fully.

3.45 pm

The Committee was concerned that having been re-profiled, that funding is now being surrendered. The Committee sought clarification of the implications that that would have on waste management. The Department advised the Committee that sacrificing that funding at this stage is in keeping with the waste management groups' project timetables. The Department of the Environment has advised DFP that the funding will be required in the next Budget period.

I stress to the Finance Minister the importance of ensuring that the necessary funding is available when it is needed so that the Department of the Environment can honour its commitments to support local government's waste management functions. The Department advised my Committee that if the full funding is not forthcoming when it is required, there will be a significant impact on local government. Although waste infrastructure procurements

could proceed in the absence of central government funding, district councils would, ultimately, have to pay higher gate fees to the private partners that operate waste facilities, which would have to be funded through the district rate.

The Department told the Committee that the average district rate increase that is associated with the introduction of the new infrastructure has been estimated to be at around 5.1% by 2017-18 with strategic waste infrastructure fund (SWIF) support. However, it would increase to around 7.3% without that support.

In addition, the Department cautioned that if the EU waste framework and landfill directives' targets for recycling household waste and diverting waste from landfill are not met, Northern Ireland could face infraction fines of up to £500,000 each day. That would have a significant impact on every one of us.

I would be grateful if the Minister could provide clarification on the cost of local government reform and on whether any money will be set aside in the next Budget round for the implementation of the shift from 26 councils to 11. Obviously, there is a great deal of concern throughout local government about where the money will be found for RPA.

In closing, as we come to the end of the current Budget and make preparations for the next, I urge the Finance Minister to ensure that SWIF money that is surrendered from this year's Budget will be made available to the Department when it is required. On that basis and on the Environment Committee's behalf, I support the motions.

Mr Ford: It is always a pleasure to speak in an open-ended debate. However, members of the Environment Committee should never speak immediately after the Chairperson of the Committee has covered all the major issues. I have no doubt that that will please the Minister to some extent.

As other Members mentioned, the Assembly debates motions such as these in something of a vacuum. We are dealing with the issues of a world recession and problems of public finance that have flown to every country in the Western World — they have certainly flown to this region of the UK — in circumstances in which three years ago, the Executive chose to set a three-year Budget rather than engage in a

proper budgetary process every year. Therefore, the Assembly must deal with what is, in effect, the limited manoeuvrability that the Executive imposed upon themselves and landed with the current Finance Minister.

That was brought about partly by their decisions to freeze the regional rate, which is effectively a cut in real terms, and to delay the almost inevitable introduction of water charges. Those decisions were made instead of the time being taken to find a way to deal with charging for water and sewerage that would be better, fairer, would encourage conservation and would deal with people who live in what might well become water poverty to parallel fuel poverty. Simply delaying the introduction of those charges for two or three years stores up inevitable problems. Those simple issues of regional rate reform and water charging would cover significantly more than half the deficit that the Minister seeks to cover this year.

In that context, therefore, the Assembly must make the best of what it can do, rather than have a full re-examination that may, perhaps, have allowed greater reprioritisation of the economy on the point that the Finance Minister and his two predecessors have made on numerous occasions.

Despite the Chairperson doing her best to trump me, I want to talk about one or two environmental issues. It is clear that we are significantly slower than other regions of the UK in introducing a number of areas of EU legislation, with the result that we face infraction proceedings from Brussels. There is also a risk that any fines that are levied as a result of our failure will be levied purely on the Northern Ireland exchequer, because they will be our responsibility; the Treasury will not accept any responsibility for something that is our fault. Not spending the money required to get those issues right will have significant knock-on effects on the work of the Department.

Due to the loss of income incurred during the recession, the Department also has problems with dealing with issues such as planning fees. As the Chairperson said, the Department is also dealing with significant issues in the review of public administration and whether the alleged savings are voodoo or real. There needs to be significant investment in the work of local councils to ensure that the review of public administration will proceed and that

savings can be made. We have seen nothing of it yet. That has led to the potential loss of bodies such as the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committees, which was debated last week. In the short term, they are easy cuts. However, when we look at the cost-benefit analysis of the voluntary effort that goes into some of those bodies and similar ones in areas such as Strangford, and into a range of other environmental non-governmental organisations, we see that there are benefits to the public purse. A relatively minimal input of public money would prevent the loss of those benefits.

We saw the same thing happen during the past year over the issue of support to road safety committees. I fear that we are going in that direction, because there is no doubt that we are spending less than other areas of the UK on environmental protection, and we are seeing a loss through that.

Agriculture is suffering from the inability to make the most of what may be there. First, there was the Crossnacreevy debacle, but in the face of that and the necessary money going into the farm nutrient management scheme, we have seen the potential loss of some other grant aid. At this stage, I declare my wife's interest in agriculture, which is on my register. We face the potential loss of grants under the countryside management scheme, which has huge benefits for the appearance of this region and for encouraging tourism. If farmers do not get maximum grant aid, such development could suffer.

The farm modernisation scheme was mentioned during this afternoon's questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Although limited, money available in that scheme unlocks further expenditure by farmers in investment in their farms, and that benefits construction and small, local engineering firms. It is all part of the interconnectedness of our economic system, which we are ceasing to deal with properly.

Nationalist Members talked about an all-island economy, to which there are economic benefits. However, there is also economic competition between North and South, as there is with other places. I understand that there is to be a further report presented tomorrow on the opportunity for harmonisation of, at least, corporation tax on a North/South basis. That will be of interest to the Minister. However, harmonisation would require investment by the Executive in unlocking future potential benefits. The question is

whether the money is available to do that in Northern Ireland. There is also the minor detail of whether the Treasury would allow us to do it. However, I suspect that that may be beyond our wit this afternoon.

When we seek inward investment to grow our economy, we must recognise that although there are benefits to competition, Newtownabbey will be in competition with New Ross, Newport and New Lanark, as we seek to produce the investment.

The Minister would be disappointed if I did not refer briefly to public expenditure, the cost of segregation and the need to build a shared future. We saw that as long ago as March 2005, when the shared future document was published. It highlighted that parallel living and the parallel provision of facilities were morally and economically unsustainable. It also suggested that simply adapting to segregation rather than seeking to change it was the road to nowhere with regard to building the economy, because it was a totally inefficient resource allocation.

We heard that repeated last year at the economic conference by Mayor Bloomberg of New York. It is not some airy-fairy liberal policy that the Minister might choose to deride about building a shared future: it is a policy of practical economics, making the most of public resources and building an economy that can compete anywhere in the world.

My colleague Trevor Lunn has already talked to a considerable extent on the issue of education and the costs of segregation there. With regard to the Department of the Environment, a recent report from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors pointed out that Northern Ireland's global footprint, in carbon footprint terms and general energy use, is significantly higher than it should be because we do not have a shared future. We have seen not just the direct costs in issues such as housing, but the opportunity costs of what is lost because people are unable to build new housing and manage existing housing stocks efficiently. If people from different backgrounds can live side by side in Antrim and Newtownabbey, why can they not do so in north Belfast? Unless we address those issues and invest money in the good relations programme, we will not see the efficient use of the housing stock. That situation has a knock-on effect in other areas, such as public transport.

I trust that in responding to the debate, the Minister, with his keen concern for ensuring the best value for public money, will at least give us some indication of where he is endeavouring to make representations to his colleagues about the way in which other Departments are run as to whether they are making the most efficient use of the resources that he allocates to them and how he sees that efficiency improving in the future. There is no doubt that we are at the start of a number of years of difficulty as we face the new public spending round. We cannot expect that this year will be a simple and easy year and problems will be resolved next year. We face many difficulties, and the problem is that we have not yet seen a strategic approach to tackle those difficulties. We need a lead on that from the Executive and, more particularly, from the Minister of Finance.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. I was a member of that Committee, and the benefits of sport and art across Northern Ireland are clear and include social, health and regeneration benefits. At a time when we are trying to encourage greater participation and access into sport, this is hugely disappointing. The Minister clearly has a strategy of investing to save, and there is no better investment across Northern Ireland than investing in art and sport for future generations. The Committee has just finished its inquiry into funding for the arts, and it is due to commence an inquiry into the funding of sport. I see a number of Committee members and former Committee members in the Chamber. It is increasingly important, even bearing in mind the Health budget, to invest in sport at an early stage.

I will move on to more prepared comments. Just about every other Government has gone through major upheavals in their Budget, their programme for government and their investment plans since the beginning of the recession. Here, we have tinkered around the edges and, as a result, our economy is underperforming and many people are needlessly unemployed and face hardship. Thousands of people have been made redundant and are unable to find work because of the recession. Our response to the recession should have been to examine our major strategy platforms — our Programme for Government, our Budget and our investment strategy. The people whom we represent cannot understand why that has not happened.

We understand that we are going through a period when there is less money, and we know that the opportunities have changed and that there are new challenges. Why then do we still have the same strategies?

I am a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, and I want to examine the cuts from that perspective. I accept that the Minister, Sir Reg Empey, is serious about bringing the benefits of education and training to our people and maximising support, through the Department's programmes, to companies and their staff. The Department's problems are not confined to funding. DEL's activities are supported and dovetailed by the activities of other Departments. I want to take a few moments to talk about some of those issues, including funding, direction and integration of effort by the Executive's Departments and their agencies.

4.00 pm

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

I assume that the Assembly agrees that we must be aggressive in preparing our people, and this region, for the next phase of economic growth. That must be done through education, training and research from preschool through to higher education: a fact that is becoming doubly important in light of our inability to use selective financial assistance to promote future investment. If we do not improve our regional competencies, we will be overtaken by other regions, and it is, therefore, very disturbing that almost £30 million — £19.7 million in additional current expenditure savings, and £9 million in additional capital expenditure savings — is being cut from the budget of the Department for Employment and Learning. Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel confirm whether those reductions are a one-off, or whether those levels will provide a baseline for the new Budget and the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) period?

There will also be a £6 million reduction in the Department's employment and skills budget. Given our current levels of employment, can the Minister of Finance and Personnel outline what impact that will have on the Department's ability to provide additional training to the increasing numbers of unemployed people, and especially to the young? Is it not ironic that the Executive express the rhetoric of producing a highly skilled workforce, yet, at a time of increasing need for training, because of higher than expected

unemployment figures, the employment and skills budget has been reduced?

Higher education is critical to securing the skills and research that we need for a high-value export-orientated industry. Prior to the Budget revision, there was an almost £24.5 million growth in the higher education budget. That figure is now approximately £8.5 million, which is a reduction of almost £13 million. Does the Minister agree that that will have a negative impact on the ability of our universities and colleges to deliver the educational research that is so critical for our economic performance?

The House will be aware of the worrying dropout rates among our university students. According to figures published in 2009, 12.2% of University of Ulster and almost 6% of Queen's University first-year students dropped out. We know that one of the causes for those rates is financial pressure on students. That should merit an increase in financial assistance for students. However, in the revised Budget, student support is untouched despite an increase in eligibility numbers. Is the Minister concerned about the impact that that will have on the ability of those from lower- and middle-class income backgrounds to remain at university? Has that measure been equality-proofed?

The further education capital budget remains unchanged at £25.8 million. However, that includes £10 million from capital receipts, and the budget may come up short. Will the Minister clarify the status of the release of assets and the potential impact on budgets if those assets are not fully realised?

In addition to the impact of budgetary cuts, our economy is underperforming because of a failure to dovetail Executive activities and priorities across the various Departments. There are numerous examples of things that could and should have been done better, but I will limit my remarks to a few examples. Last week, the Committee for Employment and Learning heard evidence on the flagship programme-led apprenticeship scheme. During Question Time today, junior Minister Newton revealed that almost 50% of participants in that scheme have not acquired placements, with the result that they will never be able to attain the necessary NVQs as a passport to further education or meaningful work. Although the scheme is worthy in its conception, it has not been successful in placing apprentices in

employment. For it to succeed, it requires more than just the supply policy of training; it also requires demand policies so that there is real work for the apprentices during and after their apprenticeships, and the obvious form of that work, as referred to by Simon Hamilton, is in the building of houses. That is why the SDLP has continually called for additional resources to be put into social housing.

There are thousands of potential jobs in energy production. As part of our requirements to reduce CO2 emissions, and to cut the cost and increase the security of our supply of energy, more could be done in switching to local and renewable energy suppliers for heat and electricity. That would provide a demand for local jobs and create apprenticeships. Can the Minister outline the targets in relation to the sourcing of energy suppliers by the public sector? What actions have been taken across Departments, agencies and local government in relation to that?

More should be done to ensure that public procurement contracts are won by small and medium-sized enterprises. That not only necessitates supply-chain improvements, which are happening, but also a new approach to outsourcing. The way projects are put out to tender must be changed to give smaller, local, indigenous companies a fair crack of the whip in winning those contracts.

Those are just a few suggestions and questions that demand side policies and activities that would provide work locally; however, they require imaginative and co-ordinated Executive-led action. They may not even entail additional costs. It is our job to give people hope and confidence locally and internationally to show that we know what we are doing and where we are going and that we have a plan. I ask the Minister to give every consideration to the points made. My own region of the north-west has seen a haemorrhaging of jobs. We need affirmative action, particularly on employment-related schemes, to help that; however, the Department's reductions in expenditure are not helping.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): As usual, this has been an extensive and robust debate, with many pertinent — and some not so pertinent — issues raised. Although those issues are not always relevant to the Supply resolution, they touch on the wider economic and Budget

concerns that Members feel are worthy of debate. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, and given the spirit in which Members raised those points, I will do my best to respond as fully as possible.

I wish to acknowledge the confirmation today by the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that there has been appropriate consultation with the Committee on the spending plans reflected in the motions as a basis for using the accelerated passage procedure for the Budget Bill, which I hope to introduce shortly. The House is now well rehearsed in the logistical need for accelerated passage of Budget Bills and the need for this Budget Bill to be given Royal Assent by 31 March. I appreciate the assistance of the Committee in that matter.

I will go through some of the points that were raised, not necessarily in order of the Members who spoke, but point by point. First, a number of Members, including the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Farry, and some SDLP Members, including Mr O'Loan, raised the issue of tax-varying powers and the funding implications. However, we need to be cautious about seeking tax-varying powers from the Treasury. The two Varney reports made it clear that the Azores ruling will mean that if we seek tax-varying powers, we will have to fund any tax dispensation. Let us be clear: tax-varying powers are not a gift that will be handed to the Assembly or the Executive. If we are to have those powers, there will be a reduction in our block grant. Although it may seem very attractive, there would be consequences.

In case anyone thinks that there may be a softening of the Treasury's attitude, we are entering a time in which one can be absolutely sure that the Treasury will be even more determined to ensure that there is no loss of revenue as a result of giving greater control of the tax levers to local Administrations.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I will not go into the detailed political arguments, but I ask the Minister to expand on his remarks a little. He said that tax-varying powers will lead to a reduction in the block grant, but is it not more correct to say that the block grant will remain the same but that if we use tax-varying powers there will be fewer resources available for spending on public services?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No matter how the Member wishes to put it, the impact will be a consequence on spending for Departments in Northern Ireland. Of course, I will continue to make representation to the Treasury on taxation issues from Northern Ireland, as I have done on the issue of property reliefs on conacre land, for example. However, we have to be careful not to go down the route of requesting tax-varying powers. The Conservative Party has talked about making Northern Ireland an enterprise zone, but I would like to see the small print on that bill before I embraced it. A number of Members raised the issue of tax-varying powers.

Peter Weir and the Member for South Belfast Conall McDevitt raised the issue of departmental spending plans and departmental chapters. I understand that eight Departments have now published their proposals to deliver the additional savings that were agreed unanimously on 17 December by all the parties that are represented on the Executive. I am no respecter of persons when I say that the Department of Education, DHSSPS and OFMDFM are the guilty parties that have yet to publish their plans. I am not worried about who the Minister is; Departments should respect the Assembly's Committees and allow them to do their jobs. I hope that the respective Ministers will bring their plans forward fairly quickly.

David McNarry, who is not in his place, talked about a number of issues. He asked about capital assets realisation and whether we had overvalued assets. The Executive's position is that public bodies should dispose of surplus assets in accordance with the green book, and appraisal and evaluation must be undertaken to ensure value for money so that we can proceed with the disposal of the asset. The problem with that has been that current market conditions are such that the value of many of the assets has fallen. In that context, the central assets realisation team has been working with Departments on a number of potential development opportunities to look at where there might be a chance to dispose of some assets. Work at Grosvenor Road, Colintown town centre and the east Belfast development project has been ongoing with the CART. The First Minister and deputy First Minister asked Ed Vernon to review the original recommendations of the CART, and that report is now under consideration.

David McNarry also asked whether legislation will be freed up as a result of the Agreement at Hillsborough Castle. As part of that excellent agreement, which I believe will allow things to move forward, review teams have been set up, and I hope that his party will play its full part in those, because I am sure that he wishes to see the Assembly working, just as well as I do. I hope that feet will not be dragged, and that may well mean that legislation that is stuck in the quagmire of the Executive will get through. I hope that it will.

Much of that legislation will have no financial implications. As Ministers have said time and time again, some of it may have beneficial financial implications and some of it will have other financial implications. Some of the legislation is part of the Programme for Government and provision for it is, therefore, built into Departments' budgets. If any new financial implications arise from legislation, Departments can always make in-year bids in the monitoring process.

Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan and a number of other Members raised the prospect of further cuts appearing on the horizon and the issue of what we will do when that happens. I accept the point made by a number of Members that it is necessary to find a balance between reducing the level of borrowing at an early stage and ensuring that the economy emerges from recession.

Of course, many factors that are beyond the control of the Assembly must be taken into consideration, not least how easy will it be to continue to finance high levels of debt in the international market. We saw what happens when countries do not take appropriate action, as is the case in Greece. After its credit rating fell, its interest rate payments went up, and, consequently, its problems have become far worse. The existing, or a new, Chancellor will have to make that difficult decision.

4.15 pm

Mr McNarry asked me what I have done to try to ascertain what would be the reaction of the Northern Ireland Assembly. We told Departments to make preparations, but we do not and cannot know the scale of those. If, like me, Mr McNarry listens to Radio 4 in the morning, he will have heard George Osborne this morning. One month, Mr Osborne's party, which may well form the next Government, talks

about swingeing cuts, and the next month, it talks about less swingeing cuts. Then it talks about delaying cuts for a year, after which it goes back to talking about making cuts quickly. The inability of Mr Osborne, who may be the person next in charge of the nation's finances, to answer questions about his plans, makes it difficult for us. I told Ministers that we know what some of the implications for capital spending will be and that they must prepare themselves accordingly. In the Budget, which we will discuss tomorrow, we will consider how the invest to save fund can be applied to help Departments to prepare.

Mr McNarry and Mr O'Loan also raised the issue of a contingency fund. Although a contingency fund, as I have explained to the Assembly on several occasions, may seem attractive, it also has many downsides. If we were to set aside a contingency fund, we would need to take money from the existing Budget and put that into a pot that may or may not be spent, depending on whether an unforeseen circumstance arises. However, how long should we hold on to that money? Should we, for example, hold on to a contingency fund into which we have put £50 million until the very last week of a Budget period, when we must spend it or lose it? Alternatively, when three months of a Budget period remain and no claims have been made on the fund, should we distribute that money to the Departments? Members should not forget that the dioxin scare, which cost us more than £20 million, occurred in the last month of a Budget period. In light of that, how long could we hold on to a contingency fund before running the risk of losing the money? Contingency funds might not be an effective use of resources.

Mr O'Loan: I wish to make a small point about the detail of the Minister's argument. I do not deny what the Minister says about the difficulties of a contingency fund. My point was that there is an issue with contingencies. When a problem presents itself, it must be addressed. The current mechanisms for dealing with such problems through the monitoring rounds were not sufficient to deal with issues that arose recently and will undoubtedly arise again.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I take issue with the Member on that. No contingency arose that we were unable to address through in-year monitoring. This year, we dealt with swine flu, the C Series project and several other issues through in-year monitoring.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I just wish to finish my point. Of course, dealing with contingencies has sometimes been painful for Departments, but there are reduced requirements during the year. Given that we are reducing the level of overcommitment to zero next year, the number of in-year monitoring opportunities to deal with those kinds of events should be greater. I do not want to spend too much time on that point, because I wish to deal with many others. However, I repeat that we are happy to have a frank debate about how we should deal with any unforeseen circumstances that arise. Is in-year monitoring the best way to deal with that, are contingency funds a better solution, or are there alternative means to consider?

Mr O'Loan also asked why the issue of dealing with equal pay claims was not built into the Budget. The equal pay claim was not built into the Budget because the amount had not been crystallised at the beginning of the period that the 2008-2011 spending plans cover. Even when an amount did come to light, uncertainties arose over the total costs involved.

Mr O'Loan said that we should have been up front about the amount involved and that I should have told the Assembly what we believed the equal pay claim would cost. However, it would have been absolute madness to do that during negotiations. I notice that in Mr O'Loan's response to my intervention, he said that before negotiations started, I could have told the Assembly what the figure was likely to be. I would not like to send Mr O'Loan to negotiate for me if that is how he believes negotiations should take place.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have already been fairly generous in taking interventions, but, as I mentioned the Member by name, I may as well give way again.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I do not know why he feels that he has to defend himself so energetically. My criticism is not of the current Minister but of one of his predecessors — two Ministers of Finance and Personnel ago — who, when presenting the three-year Budget, did not draw our attention to the equal pay issue, despite knowing very well about it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At that stage, no Executive decision had been made as to whether we would go down the route of settling the equal pay issue. The Member said that the Assembly should have been informed of the amount that we had allocated for the equal pay claim in the Budget. However, that would have been madness ahead of any negotiations, and I assure him that I will show solidarity with my colleagues on the issue, because they made a sensible decision.

The Member went further when he said that we should now be paying out to people who were not covered by the equal pay decision, despite the fact that the union agreed on the number of people who should be covered and agreed with the terms. The terms fit in with equality legislation, and to have gone beyond the equality legislation and framework would have left us with a much larger bill.

Mr Hamilton raised the issue of funding the equal pay settlement and the £26 million ongoing cost to DSD. Back pay is being covered by the Executive taking money from a central pot. However, the ongoing cost to Departments has to be borne by those Departments. In percentage terms, my Department suffers as big a hit as DSD because of the number of AAs and AOs whom we employ. To do anything else would be to build no incentive into the Budget process for Departments to find better ways in which to operate or to decide whether as many AAs and AOs are needed. If the cost were always going to be funded centrally, Departments would simply keep doing what they were doing and maintain the same number of employees, as there would be no need for individual Ministers to make efficiencies.

Mr F McCann: Does the Minister agree that quite a number of people feel let down because they have not been included? Some of those people missed out by only days or weeks on what, to them, would have been a considerable amount of money.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I recognise that disappointment. Perhaps sometimes, during the process, expectations were raised in a way in which they should not have been. All that I can say is that negotiations took place with the trade unions that represent those people and the trade unions believed the settlement, which was within the legislative framework that we had to deal with, to be fair

and equitable. Many of those disappointed people are my constituents and have written to me. Nevertheless, I think that we went into the negotiations to try to deal with the issue as fairly as we could, and that is why the unions subsequently sold the agreement to their members.

Mr O'Loan and Mr McLaughlin raised the issue of the Barnett formula and its challenges. It is quite right that the House of Lords indicated that the need for spend in Northern Ireland is greater than that in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, per capita spend in Northern Ireland is greater than that in other parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, may even be greater than the gap in need.

Time and time again, I have made the point that opening the Barnett formula would not guarantee that Northern Ireland would be better off financially. The powerful political lobbies in England and Scotland — countries that have greater representation at Westminster — will make the case that although there is greater need in Northern Ireland, public spending per capita is already much greater here than in other parts of the United Kingdom.

I am not encouraging a reopening of the Barnett formula, but if we are going to have an examination of how our allocation is determined, there should be independent adjudication, and the Treasury should not have the last word. If the Treasury has the last word, there is a danger that we will lose out. In the discussions on the spending review 2010, I have been saying to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that the current economic situation should not mean that Northern Ireland is targeted as part of the Government's plans to reduce the budgets that they allocate.

Mr McLaughlin: Perhaps the Barnett formula is a subject that we should discuss again. The Barnett formula was based on the so-called convergence principle, the idea being that all regions would be equalised and would have access to the same level and quality of service. However, the record shows that the convergence policy has never worked and that the quality of service in the North is, at best, 85% of that which would be expected in the southern regions of England. Therefore, the whole basis of the Barnett formula was flawed. The Minister made the point that reopening the Barnett formula would not necessarily work in our favour,

but there is a case for saying that it is based on a flawed premise.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not want to go back to my favourite subject of health, but I point out to the Member that some reports have indicated that the lack of convergence might be because the available resources were not used as effectively as they might have been. I suspect that that is how the Treasury would counter the Member's point.

I want to make it very clear that I will not lie down and roll over when fighting for expenditure in Northern Ireland. All that I am saying is that we should be very careful what we wish for. Although we may think that opening the Barnett formula would be good for Northern Ireland, it could have unintended and unhelpful consequences. Therefore, instead of going down the easy and attractive route of opening the Barnett formula, we must be very careful.

Being the brave man that he always has been, and at least he is consistent, Dr Farry stuck his head above the parapet on the issues of rates and water charges and the need to consider raising them to provide more internal sources of income. If we give people good public services, they must be expected to pay for them. As Dr Farry so eloquently put it:

"Money does not grow on trees."

If we want to spend money on public services, we must raise it. The one thing that I want to be sure of first of all is that our money is spent effectively and efficiently. There is no point in going to somebody and saying that although we waste your money, we want some more of it to waste. That is one reason why it is important that we make efficiencies first.

I do not want to raise the issue again, because it is sometimes seen as an easy response, and I do not want to go down the populist line, but efficiencies could be made in the Assembly by reducing the numbers of Members and Departments. That could go some way towards addressing the deficit. We spent £13 billion last year. Nobody can tell me that every pound was spent effectively. Before we start looking at increasing charges to the public, we must look at those issues.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a moment.

I accept Dr Farry's point about equality. Is it right that we do not charge one of his well-off constituents in North Down for water when that results in someone who is in a low-income job or who does not have a lot of money losing out on a service?

I could turn the question around and ask him whether we want to charge a low-paid worker who does not qualify for benefit approximately £400 a year for water so that we can fund the post of a well-paid civil servant. It is an equality issue.

4.30 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: On the matter of efficiencies, I am sure that the Minister is aware of the level of sickness and absenteeism in the Civil Service. At last week's meeting, the Committee discovered that 19,000 working days were lost in the Department of the Environment alone from 1 April 2009 to the end of December 2009. If we are to concentrate on efficiency savings, we must address that matter. Does the Minister have any thoughts on how to address that problem?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is music to my ears. I am glad that the SDLP now takes the DUP route on that matter. Do not forget that the current First Minister, when he was the Minister of Finance and Personnel, was the first person to raise in the Assembly the matter of unacceptable levels of sickness, and he was pilloried for doing so. The Member is absolutely right: in any examination of efficiencies, that matter must be properly addressed. That issue has been raised with Departments. Absenteeism is more heavily concentrated at some levels and in some Departments. When I was the Minister of the Environment, I asked personnel and HR staff to deal with that important issue.

Mr Hamilton talked about difficult Budget decisions and public sector pay. When the Executive discussed the Budget for next year, we requested an investigation into the impact of restrictions on public sector pay, whether through a pay freeze or reductions. That work is ongoing. However, I must say to the Member that it is not a panacea. We have contractual obligations on pay scales that probably account for about a 2·4% increase every year. As far as the top rates of pay are concerned, we have already stopped bonuses for civil servants in

Northern Ireland, and the Treasury will make decisions on public sector pay. Given that the rate of pay for most people who are employed in the public sector is negotiated outside Northern Ireland, that depends on national policy rather than on what happens here.

Mr McDevitt accused me of all kinds of things. He was worried about the Budget and said that I was using sticking plasters and was sceptical about the recession. He said that the Budget process is predicated on efficiencies — I thought that that was a good idea, but he seemed to think that it was a problem — and that it must be more strategic. We are not talking about next year's Budget; this is not a take-note debate. Today's debate is on changes to this year's Budget. Many of the charges that he made against me were unfair. I am sure that his speech today will be a good speech for another debate at another time.

Mr McDevitt: Although I am new to this place, as far as I know we will vote on the Supply resolution for 2010-11 at the end of the debate. With the greatest respect, is that not correct?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I made it clear that we are talking about agreeing the first part of next year's Budget to ensure that Departments have a degree of continuity. However, the Member's entire speech was based on the debate on next year's Budget. He also said that significant changes were required, that the Budget is not strategic enough and that we did not respond to the recession. He ignored the changes to the in-year monitoring process that I highlighted. The Member must accept that the household fuel payments, the deferral of water charges and the freeze on non-domestic rates were genuine attempts to help people through the hardship of the recession, attempts that he seems to have ignored.

The Member also talked about the need for additional moneys, but he was not alone in that. He was mild compared with the Member who sits in front of him. He was not happy with the way that money was spent; he wanted it spent in other ways. He talked about the health budget — I cannot make out my writing — and another Budget area. The Member in front of him, however, excelled himself. He said that this was not a strategic Budget and that we were not spending money in the right way. He suggested that he had a few ideas and that we would have to use our imagination. He then

proceeded to spend another Budgetful of money on universities, social housing, apprenticeships, energy projects and sports. He went on and on, but, just like the Member for South Belfast, he did not mention one line of the Budget that he would have changed to facilitate all that spending. It was not imagination that he wanted me to use; he wanted me to dream.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a wee minute or two.

How on earth were we meant to address all the issues that were listed? I have zoned in on two Members; other Members did the same but not to the same extent. This is what brings the process into disrepute sometimes. We simply come out sounding like youngsters in a sweetie shop — “I want that, that, that, that, that and that, Mammy.” It does not matter if your mammy has no money in her purse or what it is that you want her to change; it is just a matter of, “Give me all this.” Mr Ramsey’s speech was just that kind of speech, as was that of the Member for South Belfast, although to a lesser extent.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Minister agree that one reason why he cannot substantially answer the questions raised is that he is, in fact, dealing with a Budget that is three years old? Would it not be his preference, as Minister, to bring a nice, clean and fresh Budget to the House? Such a Budget would be able to deal with all the issues in the proper context, which is recession. That was not the context in which the first Budget was written.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I know that the Member and other Members talked about having a nice, clean and fresh Budget every year or this year. First, let us look at the changes to the Budget. It was not as if we simply ploughed on regardless and that 2010 was the same as 2008. I cannot remember the figure off the top of my head, but we reallocated approximately £200 million in in-year monitoring. We then introduced the new Budget process for next year, with a reallocation of £370 million. That is a substantial part of the process. I have highlighted some of the practical measures that we took as a result of that action. It cannot be said that we simply ignored the change that occurred between 2008 and now. I say to the Member that Departments and, indeed, Members who made representations at the beginning of the Budget process indicated

that they would rather see three-year Budgets than year-on-year Budgets because they allow for a degree of planning. Of course, that means that, if plans go awry or things change, adjustments have to be made, but I do not accept the contention that changes were not made, nor do I accept that we did not try to respond to the issues that arose as a result.

Mr Lunn raised the issue of prep school funding. I share his concerns about the Minister of Education’s ideological decision. I have raised with her my belief that the issue is novel and contentious and is one that the Executive should decide on. The Minister of Education should not have the right to make a decision on that issue by herself. I take Mr Lunn’s point that that issue could cost the education sector dearly, but, of course, it would not be the first time that, for ideological reasons, decisions were made that may well have a bigger cost impact than that which had been originally intended. It is important that the Executive should look at that.

Mr Attwood and Mr McLaughlin raised the issue of North/South co-operation. I want to make it clear that I do not run away from North/South co-operation. I must also emphasise that neither do I gloat at the economic difficulties on the other side of the border. I may have political differences with others and I may not want any political joining-up of the two parts of the island, but I recognise that economies are integrated: what happens on the other side of the border will have an impact here. If there is prosperity in the Republic, there is the chance of prosperity here. Likewise, if there are economic difficulties in the Republic, there will be economic difficulties here.

I will happily work with the Finance Minister in the Republic to resolve issues, just as I worked with the Environment Minister in the Republic when I was Minister of the Environment. I just do not happen to believe that we need to do that by setting up expensive structures. It should be sufficient for Ministers to work genuinely to encourage co-operation between two states that have an impact on each other’s economies. I have no difficulty in publicly declaring that I want to ensure, through economic co-operation, that the people of Northern Ireland benefit just as the people in the Irish Republic benefit. I am fully committed to that dialogue. Indeed, this week, I will again meet the Finance Minister in Dublin to talk about banking, among other issues.

Mr McElduff mentioned the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's reduced requirement in the February monitoring round of £2.5 million in capital. It is my understanding that a number of issues are involved. If, for one reason or another, money is not used for the purpose for which it was voted, it is up to the Minister to surrender it so that it can be reallocated. I would make that point to Mr Storey regarding the Minister of Education. That money has to be surrendered; it is not a case of the Minister saying that he or she could spend the money on something else. I do not think that, from the point of view of accountability, the Assembly would want that to happen in any case.

Mr O'Loan talked about slippage in capital projects. On a previous occasion, I told him that we have delayed any decisions to see what will happen with the projects and the capital market. We need to be assured that the projects will move forward in the way that has been suggested.

Mr Storey mentioned the STEM funding that the Department of Education surrendered. It was used to purchase buses to visit schools. It was rightly surrendered because the rest of the money had not been used for the purposes for which it was given.

Mr Cobain raised the issue of structural maintenance. I recognise the need for and importance of structural maintenance. However, just like Mr McDevitt and Mr Ramsey, he did not say where the money should come from.

Dolores Kelly mentioned the local government reform programme, and she will know that it is being discussed at the strategic leadership board. The funding options will be looked at. Since the savings will be attributed to councils, investment by those councils would not be unexpected. However, the Environment Minister will be bringing proposals to me in the near future.

Mr Ford mentioned the costs of division. I do not want to disappoint him by not responding on the issue. It is up to individual Departments to find savings. I can assure him that, if money can be saved and the costs of division reduced by looking at different ways of doing things, I will be more than happy to pursue the matter with individual Ministers. I do not wish money to be wasted for any reason. However, it is not always easy to make savings, and the savings are not always as apparent as the Member sometimes suggests they are.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their contributions. In a democracy, it is important to debate issues fully and for elected representatives to express the views of their constituents. It is unfortunate that not all Members appreciate the basic concepts of budgeting. Once again, we have heard many suggestions about where additional money could be spent, but it is not clear where that money should come from. I hope that maybe, over time, we will have a dose of realism. I have said from the start that I am happy to look at where we can make savings.

4.45 pm

I commend the resolutions to the Assembly. I urge a corporate approach to the continued work of the Executive, as reflected in the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, on delivering effective, efficient public services to the people of Northern Ireland. I ask that Members support the motions.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a total sum not exceeding £13,772,054,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,567,071,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2009-2010 that was laid before the Assembly on 8 February 2010.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £6,197,971,000 be granted out

of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2011 and that resources, not exceeding £6,662,114,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2011 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2010-11 document that was laid before the Assembly on 8 February 2010. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Budget Bill: First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA 8/09], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2010 and 2011; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31st March 2010 and 2011; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2010.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that written notification has been received from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to confirm that the Committee is satisfied that, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), there has been appropriate consultation with the Committee on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that the Bill can, therefore, proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. The Second Stage will be brought before the House tomorrow, Tuesday 16 February 2010.

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of the Environment, Mr Edwin Poots, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. There is one amendment, so there will be a single debate on that amendment, which deals with reducing the amount to be paid under any future severance scheme to take account of other elected offices held while serving as a councillor.

Clause 19 (Severance payments to councillors)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to move the following amendment: In page 11, line 30, leave out subsection (3) and insert

“(3) If regulations under subsection (2)(a) provide for the amount of any severance payment payable to, or in respect of, a person to be calculated by reference to any period for which that person was a councillor, then for the purposes of that calculation there shall be disregarded any period in which that person was both a councillor and—

- (a) a member of the Assembly (within the meaning of the Northern Ireland Act 1998);*
- (b) a member of the House of Commons; or*
- (c) a member of the European Parliament.”*

The amendment is a replacement for clause 19(3) and relates to severance payments to councillors. At Consideration Stage, I advised that I agreed with the amendment that Mr Kinahan and Mr McCallister tabled. That amendment provided that, where the method of calculating the amount of severance payment depends on length of service, my Department's regulations must provide that any period in which a person was both a councillor and an Assembly Member, or a councillor and a Member of the House of Commons, will be disregarded.

During the debate at Consideration Stage, I pointed out that I wished to amend the provision to include any period in which a person was both a councillor and a Member of the European Parliament. I also sought clarity from Members on whether any period of service as a Member

of the Assembly should include periods of service in previous Assemblies or bodies. There appears to be consensus among Members that only periods of service as a Member of the Assembly since 1998 should be disregarded. Accordingly, my proposed amendment provides that service as a Member of the Assembly since 1998 will be disregarded in calculating the amount of any severance payment. Any period in which a person was both a councillor and a Member of the European Parliament will also be disregarded.

My proposed amendment will make it clearer to the public that periods in which a councillor received payment from the public purse for another elected public office will not be counted for the purposes of a severance award.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and as a Member of the House.

On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the amendment. The Committee considered proposals for the amendment on 4 February 2010 and gave its support, subject to the term “Assembly” being defined. The Committee concurred that, for a range of reasons, it would be appropriate that, in clause 19, “the Assembly” should refer to the Assembly that was established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Committee members who have immediate relatives who may be affected by the definition abstained from the discussion. The Committee welcomed the Minister's letter of 10 February, which indicated that “the Assembly” should refer to the Assembly that was established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Committee gave its full support to the amendment on 11 February.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a Member of the House, a member of North Down Borough Council, a member of the transition committee of North Down Borough Council and Ards Borough Council, the vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and a member of policy development panel A. Having used up my time, I should probably sit down now. I should also indicate that —

The Minister of the Environment: Policing Board.

Mr Weir: The Minister has heckled me using the words “Policing Board”. However, those of us who carry the extensive burden of sitting on the Policing

Board do not receive remuneration for it. Membership of the Policing Board does not, therefore, count as a clash. The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, who served on the Policing Board previously, can testify to that.

I have no intention of falling within the purview of this, or any other, amendment or of seeking any remuneration under the clause. Therefore, I can speak in the debate with a reasonably clear conscience if nothing else.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: That makes a change.

Mr Weir: Some Members may view this as a somewhat novel situation.

The House welcomed the previous amendment, on which the new amendment is based, as an honest attempt to square the circle between two reasonable but contradictory positions on severance for councillors who were involved in the Assembly. On the one hand, there is a feeling that those who benefited substantially from the public purse as Members of the Assembly should not be treated on the same basis as councillors, who are paid a relatively small amount.

On the other hand, there was an equally valid argument that anyone receiving a form of redundancy payment should be treated equitably. One could argue that a full-time politician is no different from a doctor, lawyer or accountant who also leaves the council through severance and who may be on a higher wage than an Assembly Member. Both arguments are valid.

Mr Kinahan and others put forward a reasonable argument to try to square the circle that councillors who had been Members of the Assembly should not benefit for the period during which they had been Members, but for any period before that, they should be eligible when they had been in the same position as other councillors. For example, it may be in future that someone will be a Member for a month before an election, as has happened. If there were a simple blanket disqualification on all MLAs for all time, MLAs who had served 20 years on the council would receive nothing because they had been MLAs for a month. That is not equitable.

The argument relating to the Assembly and the House of Commons is a good one. However, as it was raised in the debate by the Minister,

Mr Ford and me, it left a definitional issue as to what is meant by "Assembly". The intention is to cover Members from the 1998 Assembly onwards, but that question was left unresolved. Given the brief look of blind panic on the face of the proposer of the motion, it is clear that issues relating to the 1982 and 1973 Assemblies had not been taken into direct consideration. I may be wrong, but there is only one councillor in Northern Ireland affected by membership of the 1973 Assembly: an individual in south Down. Several councillors, though not many, are affected by membership of the 1982 Assembly.

There is a difference between the 1982 Assembly and the 1998 Assembly. Members will recall that the 1982 Prior Assembly was the "rolling devolution" that never rolled. Commensurate with that, the remuneration that Members of the 1982 Assembly received would have been only a fraction of what Members of this House receive. From that point of view, membership of the 1982 Assembly was not, in effect, a full-time job. Consequently, with regard to the Minister's amendment, it is fair and equitable to say that this provision should apply from 1998 onwards.

The Minister proposes one other tidying-up amendment on membership of the European Parliament. Logically, if we are disqualifying people for the period of their service in the Assembly and in the House of Commons, the European Parliament is analogous. Until recently, Members of the European Parliament received the same wages as MPs. That has now been standardised, and MEPs are paid the same wage throughout Europe. Logically, membership of the European Parliament should be on the same basis as membership of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the House of Commons. Only one person who has been a councillor has also been an MEP, and that was for a matter of months. That will soon come to an end anyway.

From the point of view of equity, this is a comprehensive solution. Some will continue to argue on either side of the equation: either that there should be no payment or full payment. However, this seems to be a sensible compromise. I welcome the work that has been done by the Minister in tidying up the Bill through this amendment to ensure that it is effective. It should be welcomed by all sides of the House and I support it.

Mr Kinahan: I declare an interest as a councillor on Antrim Borough Council.

I welcome the amendment and support the changes that it will introduce. It is only a slight change, despite the rather long explanation that we just heard. I would like to claim credit for it. There was not a moment of panic; there might have been a tiny bit the other day, but none at the moment.

5.00 pm

I am pleased that the amendment applies to Members of the Assembly, within the meaning of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I had not thought about that difference, so I welcome the clarification. I also welcome the fact that the amendment includes MEPs. I congratulate all the councillors who have worked hard on our behalf for many years. In many cases, initially, they received no pay or pension. They should be congratulated, and they deserve severance payments.

If I were offered a severance payment, I would not accept it. I have been a councillor for only an initial term, and severance payments should not apply to new boys. I would welcome the MEP's emulating her colleague's decision to stand down from Belfast City Council.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. I do not think that anything new was raised. We have struck a harmonious note once again. That is a further demonstration of the type of unity that we can bring to the House, even to the extent that Mr Ford did not speak during the debate. That greatly assisted us in respect of community relations.

Mr Ford: I am astounded, Mr Deputy Speaker. I really did not think that it was necessary for all parties in the House to say that they agree. The work was done last week. However, if the Minister wants me to speak, I will say that I am glad that the work was done last week and that it has been tidied up today.

The Minister of the Environment: That really seals it now that we have Mr Ford's support. I thank all the Members who addressed the amendment today. I trust that everything is clarified and that we can now move ahead. In the not-too-distant future, I hope to bring other legislation on local government issues before the House.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 18 June 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA Bill 6/09].

The Committee Stage of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill began on 27 January 2010. Members will be aware that the Bill makes four provisions to enable local councils to close roads for special events and to introduce a permit scheme for roads and works on roads, and for two smaller issues that enable the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to hold inquiries and to take account of changes to the functions of the Lord Chief Justice and the Lord Chancellor.

During Second Stage, I informed the House that the Committee for Regional Development did not oppose the principles of the Bill, and that remains the case. Thus far, during Committee Stage, the Committee wrote to a range of key stakeholder organisations to request their views on the Bill. It also published a notice in local newspapers to provide any individual organisation with the opportunity to put forward views on the Bill. The Committee agreed a four-week deadline for submissions, which ends on 8 March 2010. The Committee intends to hold evidence sessions with key stakeholders, including the Department, in February and March, and will arrange other evidence sessions as appropriate when it has considered all the written evidence that it receives.

Although the Bill is relatively short, it makes provisions for the introduction of a charge for permit schemes for works on roads and a permit scheme for road closures for events on roads. Those provisions may have an impact on the infrastructure, telecoms and utilities sectors of the economy, and on tourism and sports in Northern Ireland. We will progress the details of both the proposed schemes through subordinate legislation.

To reflect the importance of those sectors to the competitiveness of Northern Ireland and the quality of life for its citizens, members

are seeking a Committee Stage extension to 18 June 2010. Members agreed that date to take account of the context of the Bill, the time needed to gather written evidence, hear oral evidence and compile and consider the Committee's report to the Assembly.

The extension also allows leeway for the Committee to consider in detail the evidence that it receives and any amendments it may wish to propose. I reiterate the Committee's support for the principles in the Bill. In seeking the extension, members are, rightly, being prudent and cautious in their approach, and are seeking to progress business in an efficient and effective manner while discharging their scrutiny responsibilities on behalf of the Assembly.

The Committee is committed to the timely passage of the Bill, and it will endeavour to report on it to the Assembly ahead of the proposed 18 June 2010 deadline, if possible. In the interim, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 18 June 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA Bill 6/09].

Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 April 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA Bill 5/09].

Mr Shannon: I have a quick comment, about which I spoke to the Committee Chairperson beforehand.

The week before last, I spoke to Newtownards and district wildfowlers. I informed them that the closing date for responses to the Bill was 31 March 2010. I want to ensure that wildfowlers' associations that have contacted me and those whom I have informed are made aware of the extension and of the new response date. It is important to them that issues are considered, such as moonlight shooting in the UK, having curlew included on the quarry list, the extension of the foreshore season and the use of snares. In fairness, during the debate on the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, the Minister of the Environment stated, and it is in the Hansard report, that the thousands of people involved in country and field sports want to be part of the process. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter, even though I am not a member of the Committee for the Environment.

Mr Weir: I wonder why? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Shannon: However, it is important that people who make a magnificent and significant contribution to country sports and conservation are involved all through the process and are notified of that possibility.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Roy Beggs.

Mr Beggs: I was not aware that I was to be called. I am content that we should have further time to scrutinise further aspects of the Bill as appropriate.

Mr B McCrea: Well said. *[Laughter.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 April 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA Bill 5/09].

Adjourned at 5.09 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I beg to move

*That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill
[NIA 8/09] be agreed.*

I shall briefly outline the purpose and main features of the Budget Bill. The Bill will give legislative effect to the 2009-2010 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2010-11 Vote on Account, which were approved through the Supply resolutions that were passed yesterday. The 2009-2010 spring Supplementary Estimates volume and the 2010-11 Vote on Account document were laid before the Assembly on 8 February 2010, and copies of the Budget Bill and its explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members.

In accordance with the nature of Second Stage as envisaged under Standing Order 32 and for the benefit of Members, I shall briefly summarise the Bill's general principles. The purpose of the Bill is to authorise the issue of £13,772,054,000 — I was going to add “and 56 pence”, but it does not say that here — from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources totalling £15,567,071,000 by Departments and certain other bodies, as detailed in the 2009-2010 spring Supplementary Estimates.

The amounts supersede those in the Vote on Account 2009-2010 and the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2009, which was passed this time last year, and those in the Main Estimate provision in the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009, which was passed by the Assembly in June 2009. The sums to be issued from the Consolidated Fund are to be appropriated by each Department or public body

for services as set out in column 1 of schedule 1 to the Bill, while the resources to be used for the purposes specified are set out in column 1 of schedule 2 to the Bill.

The Budget Bill also authorises a Vote on Account for 2010-11 of cash of £6,197,971,000 and resources of £6,662,114,000, to allow the flow of cash and resources to continue to public services in the early months of 2010-11 until the Main Estimates and related Budget Bill are approved by the Assembly in June 2010. Again, the cash and resources are to be appropriated and used for the services and purposes set out in columns 1 of schedules 3 and 4 respectively. In addition, the Bill revises the 2009-2010 limit on the amount of accruing resources that may be directed by my Department to be used for the purposes in column 1 of schedule 2. That limit includes both operating and non-operating accruing resources. Under section 8 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, a direction on the actual use of the accruing resources will be provided by way of a DFP minute, which will be laid before the Assembly following Royal Assent to the Bill.

Finally, clause 5 of the Bill authorises temporary borrowing by the Department of Finance and Personnel at an upper limit of £3,098,985,000 for 2010-11. That is approximately half of the sum authorised in clause 4(1) for issue out of the Consolidated Fund for 2010-11 and is a normal safeguard for any temporary deficiency arising in the fund as part of an efficient cash management regime. Clause 5 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power.

Accelerated passage of the Bill is needed to ensure Royal Assent as early as possible in March and, therefore, legal authority for Departments and other public bodies to spend the cash and use the resources in 2009-2010

and continue public services into 2010-11. As the House is aware, recording the detail of the December monitoring outcome announced in early January, followed by the preparation of the detailed Estimates before us, coupled with the need for Royal Assent in March, means that the accelerated passage of legislation through the Assembly is necessary.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has an important role to play in ensuring the accelerated passage of the Bill, and I am grateful that the Committee has confirmed, in line with Standing Order 42, that it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill and is content that the Bill may proceed by accelerated passage. I welcome and appreciate the assistance of the Committee in ensuring adherence to the legislative timetable for the Bill.

The Budget Bill brings to a close the second financial year of this Executive's Budget for 2008-2011. As Members are now well aware, Budgets that set spending plans for future years and in respect of which we rightly spend many hours debating in-year monitoring rounds that amend those plans do not in themselves convey cash or resources to Departments, neither do they provide Departments with the legal authority to spend that cash or use those resources. That is done through the legislation that is before the House. Of course, that means that the Assembly, after the close of the financial year, will hold Departments accountable for managing and controlling that spending and the use of resources within the limits that are authorised today. We look forward, therefore, to the provisional out-turn in June 2010 and the audited 2009-2010 resource accounts, which will be laid before the Assembly in the summer.

The spending plans that are reflected in the Budget Bill were debated and approved by the House yesterday. Therefore, there is little more that I can usefully add on the detail of the Budget Bill. I am happy to deal with any points that Members raise.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to speak first as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and then as a Member.

The Budget Bill provides statutory authority for expenditure as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates 2009-2010. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows Departments to incur expenditure and use resources in the early part of 2010-11 until the Main Estimates are voted on by the Assembly in early June.

Standing Order 42(2) states that accelerated passage may be granted for a Budget Bill provided that the Committee for Finance and Personnel:

"is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill".

Yesterday, I advised the House that the Committee has taken evidence on public expenditure issues for 2009-2010 with regard to the Department of Finance and Personnel itself and also at a strategic and cross-departmental level. At the Committee's meeting on 10 February 2010, departmental officials briefed the Committee and answered questions on the Budget Bill that is being debated today. Following that evidence session and in light of its scrutiny role in in-year monitoring rounds, the Committee was content to grant accelerated passage to the Bill. I wrote to the Speaker to inform him of the Committee's decision.

The forthcoming financial year is the final year of the Budget for 2008-2011 that was agreed by the Assembly in January 2008. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has pressed for the establishment of a settled budgetary process as we go forward. In October 2008, the Committee made recommendations in that regard in its submission to the Executive's review of the Budget process which has been taken forward by DFP.

The Committee's submission to the Executive's review was a co-ordinated one, the Committee having first taken the views of the Assembly's other Statutory Committees. It formed the first stage of the Committee's three-stage inquiry into the Assembly's role in scrutinising the Executive's Budget and expenditure. The Committee had agreed to await the outcome of the Executive's review and the response to the recommendations in its submission before proceeding to stages two and three of its inquiry.

Although it was originally scheduled to be completed in late 2008, the Executive's review has, unfortunately, been subject to delays.

The Committee understands that it will be completed when the current review of 2010-11 spending plans has been finalised. The Committee looks forward to being apprised of the outcome and to proceeding with stages two and three of the inquiry. Stage two of the inquiry will aim to review the resources available for assisting Assembly Statutory Committees and Members in undertaking Budget and financial scrutiny and to put forward a set of practical recommendations for enhancing the Assembly's capacity in that regard. That is for the future, however. Today, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

I want to comment as an Assembly Member and to concentrate on some of the issues that we looked at yesterday, which Members were keen to debate.

10.45 am

During recent debates on the Budget and future spending plans, all Members accepted that no Budget is perfect. When public finances are allocated, there are positive and negative consequences. Obviously, when Members say that funding should be given to a certain matter, they must weigh up that priority against the availability of extra money. The Programme for Government sets out priorities. Although reallocations due to reduced requirements are given, what is missing from the Budget process is the way in which those outcomes are set and evaluated, particularly in respect of delivery of the programme's priorities.

The current Budget allowance and the way in which it is adjusted year on year might be OK when there is consensus in the House, across Departments and among Ministers. During debates, however, consensus is sometimes missing, and Ministers argue, sometimes rightly, that they do not have enough money. We need to consider other ways in which to conduct the Budget process in order to ensure that we are delivering on the Programme for Government's priorities, evaluating those priorities and evaluating outcomes.

One approach is to look at the funds that we have and how best they can be spent and to look at the Executive priorities and set out different options for delivering them. That type of approach can be more adaptable, particularly given the difficulties that we are encountering with the recession. We need to consider what will happen when we come out of recession. Our

approach to setting priorities and goals must be linked to the measurement of performance and outcomes. Political will is needed to do that, and we need to work together to that end. Sometimes, the narrow party approach that some Members take causes difficulties. Local people need to have ownership of the process, and they need to have a share in the setting of priorities and to have ownership of delivery. I can look only to the way in which local councils, for instance, set their budgets. They have the local community participate in budget planning and in considering how priorities are set and delivered. We could open up a debate around that.

During yesterday's debate on the Supply resolutions, we talked about the lack of fiscal autonomy in the North. I know that some Members' opinion will differ from mine on that issue, but I ask that they at least open up the debate on it and do not close the subject down when it is being discussed. The lack of fiscal autonomy curtails our ability to deliver and implement the policy decisions that could change the standard of living and make better the lives of people in our communities. Hopefully, most of the Members are here to raise people's standard and quality of living and to make better the lives of people in their communities.

I emphasise a point that I made yesterday: rates and taxation must be based on a person's ability to pay. In the short term, we need to consider tax-varying powers. I will not come down on any side of that issue today, but we need to look at the powers that are already in the gift of the Executive and at how we can progress and develop those that need to be in the Executive's gift.

I know that Members will be talking about the block grant and the Barnett formula. The application of the Barnett formula in the North is based on head of population. However, funding that the Barnett formula determines should be based on need rather than head of population. I do not think that the Barnett formula takes into account the greater economic and social needs in the North. For instance, we have a higher proportion of older people and of children who are dependants; higher levels of unemployment; and higher levels of poverty. We also have lower wages, yet the cost of living here is high compared with parts of Britain. Therefore, the analysis should be needs-based rather than population-based.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Committee Chairperson for giving way. Will she reflect on the possible disadvantages of a needs-based system? The point has been made on many occasions that measurements are not set out objectively. Considerable scope exists for subjectivity. In view of that, is there not a risk that a needs-based system could work against us, if the powers that be in London take a different interpretation of our needs from that which the Assembly takes?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I hear what he is saying. However, it comes back to the fact that local people would be in charge of setting priorities and identifying need. I will come to that issue next, because I do not believe that the current process offers the best option; rather, it is a short-term measure.

I believe that the way forward is to look at the matter on an all-island basis and not to depend on the British Treasury to give out a block grant. However, I will come to that point.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I think that Dr Farry's point has been misunderstood. The assessments of needs and of the Barnett formula and the resources that are made available under the Barnett formula will not be based on how we assess our need but on how the Treasury assesses our needs in relation to those in other parts of the United Kingdom. The real danger with that is that, given that a gap exists already and given that some people may argue that it more than covers the difference in the needs as seen in one part of the United Kingdom as opposed to this part of the United Kingdom, reopening the Barnett formula might lead to a detrimental outcome for Northern Ireland. I think that that was the Member's point.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I understand what the Members are saying, but I am saying that I do not think that the Barnett formula as it stands is taking account of the real needs of the North of Ireland. I just outlined the needs of the population. I hear what the Minister said, and that is why I do not believe that the British Treasury should in any way control the amount of money that is to be delivered here. We need local control of that decision.

I touched on the Barnett formula, and I want to go into some of the other issues that were

debated yesterday. I ask Members not to close their mind, for ideological or other reasons, to an all-island economy. At the very least, we need to open the debate. That is all that I am asking for at this time.

Mr Storey: I listened to the Member yesterday and today, and she has repeatedly advocated the wonderful all-Ireland approach to fiscal autonomy. What fiscal autonomy does the Republic of Ireland have at this time, linked as it is with the euro and given the financial crisis that the countries that have the euro are in? Does the Member think that that is good political wisdom to foist on this House, when we already have financial benefits that we are certainly not going to give away?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I hear what the Member says. I am talking about looking at a new system. I am not talking about copying the system in the South of Ireland right across the island. If Members will give me time, I will set out some of my ideas. I am asking for people to be open-minded. For the past two years, I have been in discussions with businesspeople, people who work in the banking system and others who see the benefits of having a greater link-up of the economies of the North and the South of the island. I am asking Members to open their minds and to not close them down for ideological reasons.

Businesspeople say that the harmonisation of the two taxation systems would make it easier for people to work, live and shop in both areas of the country. The two taxation systems damage business prospects further and deepen the economic divide. One just has to look at the differential in excise duty, VAT and corporation tax and how those alternate. People might say that that differential can sometimes add to or have a positive impact on the North, but in other ways it can have a negative impact. We have to look at it beyond the current economic climate as we move forward into economic recovery. Whenever we talk about harmonising the taxation system and working together, we must be aware that the benefits would include stronger businesses, a stronger trade and a stronger skills base between North and South.

We must go further and create an all-island investment strategy that is driven by a single economic development agency. Currently, we have Invest NI and IDA Ireland, but it would create a

more stable economy for our people if investment were brought to the entire island of Ireland, as opposed to either the North or the South.

In Budget debates in this Chamber, we have talked about efficiencies and about combating wastage. However, how much wastage results from having two health systems, two education and skills services and two policing and justice systems for a population of approximately six million? We must talk about efficiencies at that level also.

We must look beyond the current economic climate and the budgetary constraints in all aspects of public spending and look forward to the recovery stage, both North and South. Harmonising the taxation systems across the island will make that process easier for our population, for businesses and for trade.

Lord Morrow: This is as near to Alice in Wonderland stuff as we are going to get. The Member has spoken about the island of Ireland, but I wonder whether the penny has dropped with her yet that there are two countries here: one affiliated to the United Kingdom and the other to the Irish Republic.

The Member has also spoken about the variations in VAT and tax between the two countries. Will she tell the House what expertise and experience she has in running businesses over the past 20 or 30 years and how can she help the House?

Is the Member also aware that not only are there two countries here, there are two currencies, with the euro in the South of Ireland and the pound sterling in Northern Ireland? The British government has not made that many correct decisions, but if ever they made a correct decision it was their refusal to enter the euro zone, because that has been one of our saving graces. It is also one of the reasons why we are not in the same predicament as the Irish Republic, which is virtually bankrupt, and I do not say that with a smile on my face. The number of shoppers who come here from the South on a daily basis tells the whole story, and I am surprised, if not amazed, that the Member has made no reference to that. I say frankly and with no disrespect that the Alice in Wonderland stuff will not wash.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: The Members has raised issues

that I am not going to answer. Insulting people is not what we are about.

Lord Morrow: I did not insult you, I asked you a question.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I am not an economist, and I have never professed to be one. However, I have as much right as you to come to the House and put my views across. I think that the Member should —

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Sorry, Mr Speaker.

11.00 am

We have had discussions in the House on the public procurement process and how it could be used at a local and central government level to maximise social and employment opportunities for people here. It can be used to secure existing jobs and to create new ones. Something like €600 million is spent on public procurement across the island of Ireland, with £3 million spent per annum in the North alone. We can use public procurement to strengthen the economy and to change people's lives and their standard of living.

Currently, there is no local accountability for taxation. In the short term, I want us to have fiscal powers; in the longer term, I believe that there should be an all-island economy.

Having no local accountability for taxation and spending means that we have no incentive to increase economic performance, because the additional revenue received — for instance, the additional revenue received in 2008 from fuel price increases — goes to the British Treasury. Therefore, there is no local incentive to increase economic performance.

There is an argument for asking for fiscal powers in the short term. However, I envisage, during today's debate, that Members will have ideological problems with considering the economy on an all-island basis. I believe that doing so is the way forward with respect to creating a better life for people here and in tackling poverty and social and economic need. I ask people to keep their minds open and not to close them down. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: The Member is advocating an all-Ireland economy and is saying that there are advantages for public procurement on an all-Ireland basis. Does she accept that because of the freedom of movement of goods and services within the European Community, businesses already have the freedom to conduct their business wherever they want? As regards public procurement, I am not aware of any barriers to companies in the Republic of Ireland that wish to do business in Northern Ireland. Through personal experience of the difficulties faced by a company I worked for, I am aware that, in the past, there have been difficulties with doing business in the Republic of Ireland because of some of the tendering processes there. I hope that those processes have now changed.

Will the Member please tell us how the utopian all-Ireland economy will be any different from the freedom of movement of goods and services that we presently have? Does she accept that issues relating to different VAT and tax regimes result from political decisions made by different Governments, and that it would be logical for those Governments to consider the smuggling that could result from such decisions when they are being made? Ultimately, those are decisions for Governments to take: business will find the most economic method when taking decisions and when presenting opportunities to individuals. In fact, that is why many people from the Republic of Ireland are coming to Northern Ireland to shop on a daily basis. It is of considerable economic advantage to them to do so.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his intervention. As regards his first point, the recent InterTradelreland report that considered procurement processes, North and South, shows that small and medium-sized businesses are being curtailed through current procurement policies. Given that our economy depends on small and medium-sized businesses, there is not the flow that the Member was talking about. This was borne out by recent evidence taken by the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the issue.

The situation is one of swings and roundabouts: at the moment, the North is probably in a better economic position than the South, but that can change, and it will change. Nobody wants to see any part of Ireland in economic difficulties, but I am talking about when the situation changes. It will change, and it will change soon. We need a system through which we can reap the benefits

at all times. It will not always be the case that the North is taking the pickings off the South.

Mr Shannon: I rise to support the Minister and to make some comments in relation to the Budget Bill. Individually, in our own homes, and as young people getting married, and so on, we are well aware of the stresses that marriage can sometimes bring in relation to paying bills, etc. Those are things that we all had to go through at an early stage. Then there were family birthdays, which brought surprises and some financial strains. It was probably not easy for most of us in the Chamber when we were starting out.

Mr Weir: Is this the Assembly or Relate?

Mr Shannon: It is the Assembly, for those who are not too sure.

I make that comparison because the Minister sets the Budget for the Province. I was one of the first Members to say that the Budget was excellent, and I did so for the following reasons: money was granted to housing and health, but no one could have foreseen the economic circumstances that were on the horizon. The DUP Chief Whip and other Members have made that point already during the debate.

The Minister responded to the swine flu issue positively, but the Assembly had to find the extra £32 million that was given to the health budget to help to address it early. That is another example of unforeseen circumstances that involve a cost to the Assembly and to everyone in the Province. Unless we have someone with the exceptional gift of being able to look into the future, the Budget cannot take into account such unforeseen circumstances. The Minister has responded to those circumstances in the best possible way within his financial confines.

People have asked me why the health budget has been subject to efficiency savings, and every Member will have been asked that question by their constituents. Departments can make savings. The spending review report said that the lowest percentage of current expenditure savings is to come from the Department of Health at 2.1%. That compares with an average of 3.1% and reflects the priority that is afforded to health and social services.

The Minister of Finance has tried to ensure that the Health Service can deliver while efficiency savings are made. There is most certainly a need to ensure that the Health

Service can thrive and continue to provide its excellent service in the Province, while making the necessary savings. However, unlike the Republic, where 35p in every pound is spent on health services, in the Province, 50p in every pound goes to the Health Service.

Some areas can and should be subject to savings. I have been told by an ex-trust worker — not my colleague Alex Easton — that, at this time every year, Departments desperately try to spend the money that they could not spend during the year. I was told that, last year, hundreds of stress balls and pencils were ordered to ensure that there was no money to return. Perhaps all those boys who are employed in the Department of Health had a stress ball for each hand and a pocket full of pencils. Money should not be spent in that way simply because the end of a financial year is coming. It should be spent more appropriately, and, in such areas, savings can be made without affecting front line services.

The review's targeted approach recognises that some Departments will have a great ability to produce savings in 2010-11 without affecting front line services more than other areas. The Minister of Finance stressed that the draft revised plans, both at Executive and departmental levels, are only proposals. However, it must be recognised that if the Department of Health were to be allowed to make a lower level of savings, other Departments would have to make even more savings. Each Department has said already that it can save no more. All Departments need to make savings, and, as much as some like to say that they run like a well-oiled machine, it does not happen that way, and all Departments can make the required cuts.

We would all like to say that no cuts are needed, but economic pressures mean that efficiency savings must be made. Every Department can do that, and in the current situation, the steps that are being taken are not only necessary but wise. One need only consider the fiasco that has been unfolding in Greece in the past week or 10 days. Who will bail out Greece? It will be the rest of Europe, and the taxpayers of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland and Members of the Assembly, will have a role to play in that. Problems in other places affect the economy and the Budget and our role in the Province.

The buck stops with the Minister of each Department. He or she alone can decide where

savings can be made by choosing whether to let go of non-essential functions. Alternatively, the Minister can play the martyr and sacrifice the bigger aspects that draw attention to his or her plight and then blame everyone else. However, that is not how it should be done.

I wish to focus on the education system for a moment and on the fact that the Minister of Education will not complete newbuilds due to a lack of funding, yet she can allocate £20,000 to education youth boards that are strictly for the introduction and promotion of the Irish language. Is that a good way to spend money? I say that it is not. During a time of cutbacks, we should be looking at where money can be better spent. At the same time, the Education Minister is offering her staff the opportunity to learn the Irish language. Is that necessary? No, it is not. As far as I am concerned, money should be invested where it is needed: in schools, newbuilds, capital builds and repairs. We must ensure that everything is done according to plan.

One of our great concerns at the moment relates to prep schools. Every Member in the Chamber has probably been contacted about the issue. A cutback of £2 million has been proposed, which will actually cost £3 million because extra prep schools will need to be provided outside the areas affected and redundancies will need to be paid for. Therefore, it is a case of saving two and spending three. Where is the honesty in that position? I believe that the proposal is wrong.

Those are the types of questions that all Departments must look at when considering their budgets. Departments are not being asked to achieve the impossible; they are being asked to tighten their belts during the economic downturn until we are able to have access to the funding that we dream of having. The Budget Bill sets out the steps that are necessary, and each Department must take those steps along this financial road, which will be easier to tread than it is now. We have to support this Budget, and I urge Members to do so.

Mr McNarry: Last week, the Ulster Unionist Party was referred to as a grumpy party in a joke shared and enjoyed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Mr Speaker, you will no doubt agree that that is a spurious comment, and it is one that I readily dispute. However, today I am entitled to say that we are an angry party.

Yesterday, the Minister made light of requests that other Members and I made for a contingency fund, yet here we have, revealed as part of the unravelling of the Hillsborough betrayal, news that the DUP made a case for £25 million in a side deal with the Government, £20 million of which was for languages. Like most people in Northern Ireland and in the Chamber, I can think of many issues that are of higher priority than languages. An opportunity of leverage was wasted and lost in a concession to the creation of a bilingual society in Northern Ireland that the two main parties agreed in their side deals with the Government. What trash and tosh. A new priority has risen to the top, to which the DUP agreed without any consultation with fellow unionists. We could have used that money in so many other and better ways.

Issues are raised weekly in our Committees concerning requests for money. The Finance Minister fully understands that, because he says that he does not have money for everything, and I appreciate that. Members of all Committees, and it does not matter which ones, are continually saying that they need money for this and that. However, an opportunity to address that matter was wasted and lost because the DUP chose to agree with their partners, Sinn Féin, and barter — they got down to that level — with the Government for £20 million for the development of the Irish language. I know about the needs of carers who are looking after their loved ones at home. They do not get a look in or earn the consideration to be a near-priority in people's minds. Money for carers was not bartered for at Hillsborough; only money for the Irish language was bartered for.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: You did not do anything.

11.15 am

Mr McNarry: If that is an achievement — going to Hillsborough to welcome £20 million for the Irish language — what an achievement to be proud of. A DUP Member has just criticised the Education Minister for using and abusing her funding to complement Irish-language development.

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr McNarry: I ask —

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Campbell wishes to raise a point of order.

Mr Campbell: Apart from the debating points, which I am sure will be refuted in the course of the debate, is there any provision in Standing Orders for factual inaccuracies to be repeated ad nauseam in the course of one speech?

Mr Speaker: The Budget Bill is wide-ranging. Therefore, Members could talk about almost anything. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I say to all sides of the House that, as far as possible, Members should try to keep within the scope of the Bill. I know that that might not be easy for Members. However, it is vital to try to do that.

I will look at the Hansard report and come back to the House and Mr Campbell about his point of order.

Mr McNarry: It always impresses me that when the party down there is rattled — and that is where it belongs: “down there” — its Members intervene with spurious points of order. However, I accept that you are going to look at the Hansard report, and I will await the outcome.

As things unravel and are revealed, perhaps we will learn what the cost of the parades panel will be, which, again, was an outcome of what appears to be developing into the “notorious” Hillsborough Castle Agreement.

What about the cost of advertising — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: What is the cost of the advertising campaign to curry support for the deal? Such things seem to be important at a time when other things cannot be attained or are set aside. We are asked to accept that we are all in this together, that it is a tight ship and that we really must understand what is going on. However, it seems that the Finance Minister can find money for what he wants, as long as it is part of the joint agenda of his party and its Sinn Féin partner. So much for consultation, which we would welcome.

The Budget Bill has two main elements: the spring Supplementary Estimates for the current financial year, which ends in April 2010, and the Vote on Account, which enables Departments to operate from April 2010 to June 2010, and which will amount to around 45% of the 2009-2010 overall Budget. In June, we will vote on a second Budget Bill, which will contain the Main

Estimates to enable the Departments to operate for the entire financial year. Therefore, in a sense, today's Budget Bill is a work in progress, and does not have to give the full picture until we get to the year's end.

I mentioned that process because the Budget for the incoming year will be impacted by two significant changes and, as a result, will not flow as freely as in previous years. First, after the general election, and no matter who wins, we can expect a new national Budget that is likely to introduce major public sector spending cuts. Northern Ireland is likely to suffer in a disproportionate way from those cuts simply because our public sector is so large. That could manifest itself in the form of a cut in the block grant, which is the main component of the Consolidated Fund through which we finance our Departments. That could leave the Northern Ireland Executive with the unpleasant decision of what to do next, which is something that they are not too experienced in so far.

Secondly, we must appreciate that national Budget cuts, which have yet to come, will come on top of spending cuts arising from the long-term failure of Departments to meet their income-generation targets as envisaged in every Budget throughout the three-year planning cycle of the comprehensive spending review period. Those cuts, which are already in the process of being levied, will result in lower baseline budgets for Departments.

That in turn will have an impact on the capacity of the Minister of Finance to operate normal in-year monitoring transfers of money throughout the coming financial year. The sums were much smaller in the past year than they had been hitherto; they may be even smaller in future. The whole process takes on the appearance of a vicious circle, and I understand and appreciate that, in such circumstances, the Minister's task is not an enviable one.

However, I remind the House that although it is understandable that the Minister of Finance talks up his Budget and trumpets as major successes the contracted normal delivery of targets, capital programmes and services by the Department, we must not become complacent in the face of the daunting tasks ahead. An arrogant complacency while the Budget slowly disappears due to block grant cuts and public spending cuts may be how the Minister likes to handle the situation, but the public, who are

more tuned in to the realities of life — and, in many cases, lucky to have one job, let alone two or three — will not thank him for that.

The Finance Minister found it necessary to come to the House to announce £400 million of reductions. The press and the public saw that as a climbdown, and they will not be fooled by any self-congratulation, smugness or complacency in our approach to what lies ahead. It gives me no pleasure to say that. I do so only because yesterday I saw the same outrageous mixture of groundless assertions, arrogant interjections and complacency from the Benches behind the Finance Minister that have characterised the management of our finances over the past year and a half.

I want to make some suggestions about savings and the prioritisation of Government programmes. I touched on those issues yesterday when I suggested a common overall priority base scale for all Government programmes, which would place each one on a common weighted scale. Pre-agreed weightings would be applied to key substantive elements of all programmes and relative weights would be applied to politically pre-prioritised factors intrinsic to them, such as healthcare, job creation and social need. Part of developing that common scale priority approach to public spending programmes would be a radical revision of the Programme for Government, which my party and many leading economists have continuously called for over the past 12 months.

We need to develop a more hard-headed value-for-money approach to how we spend the public's money so that we can veer away from wish-list politics, which was a characteristic of the euphoria that accompanied the St Andrews Agreement modifications in 2007. Sensible assessments of the potential impacts of public spending and investment and of the money that is actually available to spend, along with a setting of achievable targets, are essential in the current financial climate.

I want to venture further and suggest a range of measures for consideration. We need to consider a Civil Service pay freeze as an alternative to job cuts. Protecting jobs is an Ulster Unionist priority, and it has to be the priority of the House. A Civil Service pay freeze might save jobs; job losses will have to be the last resort. That is why I say to the Minister again that he must tell us whether he is on

course to cut public sector jobs, or whether there is an alternative that he wishes to put to the House.

We also need to consider the amalgamation of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and the Central Procurement Directorate. The economies of scale from merging two bodies with such obvious overlapping remits could result in savings of several million pounds. The CBI recently proposed a sensible course: the replacement of the SIB with a fixed-term government investment plan that sets out clearly which projects are to be delivered over the three-year CSR period and includes key milestones, timelines and performance indicators.

Rather than give what has become a Cheshire cat treatment, we should ask why the Minister of Finance, despite his self-imposed target of rate recovery levels of 98%, has achieved a rate collection level of only 91%. As he told me in a letter yesterday, that 7% shortfall represents a loss of £71.5 million to the public purse. Before the Finance Minister asked other Departments to make almost £400 million in savings, did he address and consider his own departmental shortfalls in rate recovery, which are estimated at between £124 million and £137 million? That amounts to almost 40% of the cuts that he has asked other Ministers to make.

I welcome the public spending director's announcement to the Committee for Finance and Personnel that DFP is undertaking a review of the in-year monitoring process with better financial management and a root-and-branch restructuring of the in-year financial management process. My party has been calling for such a move for the past year and a half. However, that is the very least that we can expect in light of the collapse of the underspend culture previously operated by DFP.

We want to work with the Minister — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to finish.

Mr McNarry: Most of us find the Minister likeable most of the time. We hope that relations can be improved — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr McNarry: This is an example of the arrogance and the nonsense that I referred to earlier that comes from the DUP Benches and from the hobbits who sit behind the Minister, and we all know where hobbits live.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must insist that Members make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr McNarry: Mr Speaker, we all know where those remarks come from. We hear them, and I referred to them. I am referring, through you, to the hobbits who sit behind the Minister. We all know where hobbits come from. That is what you have asked me to say, and I have said it through you.

I was working through the basis —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Neeson: He is not in the hobbit of giving way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members to be very careful with their language in the Chamber. I am listening very carefully to what Members are saying, but a sense of good temper is very important in the Chamber.

Mr McNarry: Having established that most of us like the Minister most of the time, I will conclude by saying that good results can be achieved. We need the Executive to set an example and to join together to produce co-operation and inclusion. To my mind, that is the best way that we, as an Assembly, can be constructive and instructive and can help the Minister through his difficulties and through the mistakes that he continues to make.

11.30 am

I make my appeal to Ulster Unionist Ministers as well. We need corporate and collective government. As I said yesterday, we must now be open, up front and transparent in telling people what might be the worst that lies in store. I am quite sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will address that, and I urge him to do so.

Mr O'Loan: The SDLP believes that this is the wrong Budget because it is the result of the wrong process of creating a Budget. However, my party colleagues and I will be responsible in our approach to the debate and the content of the Bill. We recognise that the finances must be put in place by the first day of a new financial year to enable us to run the Government. I hope that other Members will approach the debate responsibly; so far, the proceedings have, at times, sunk below the level of anything that could be called serious debate.

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

The process was wrong because there should have been a full, new annual Budget. The conditions were such as to require that, not to mention the legal position. The SDLP has long argued for the establishment of an Assembly Committee to prioritise the Budget, and I referred to that again yesterday. The Budget ought to address the recession and, specifically, the extremely different circumstances in which we now operate, but that has not happened.

In April 2009, the SDLP brought forward its proposals in a discussion document entitled 'New Priorities in Difficult Times'. We recognise that elements of that document require a further degree of finesse. We were prepared to put the document on the table and engage with other parties to finesse and improve it. We regret that that opportunity was not taken. Some elements of that document were incorporated into Executive policy, but only a few. A certain amount of praise was heaped on our document among political circles here, but as a whole, our project was not embraced, and we are worse off as a result.

We are not alone in pointing out weaknesses in the way in which the Budget is created. In last week's take-note debate on the 2010-11 spending plans, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel said:

"As regards the 2010-11 Budget shortfall, the Committee has previously highlighted its general concern at the range and amount of new emerging pressures on existing Budget allocations. That concern was raised as far back as October 2008 in the Committee's submission to the Executive's strategic stocktake of the Budget position for 2009-2010 and 2010-11. At that time, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) sought to assure the Committee that any pressures could be managed through the in-year monitoring processes." — [Official Report, Vol 48, No 2, p59, col 2].

The idea that difficulties can be managed through in-year monitoring has become a farce.

On Tuesday 29 January 2008, the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, said in the Chamber:

"It would be madness for any Finance Minister to bring forward a Budget and say that it will stand for three years and not be changed in any way. That would be a ludicrous position to adopt. There will be changes in the environment and in how we have to do business over the next three years. We

will be required to look at different priorities, and it will be the Executive's job to re-order them; to look at what money is released in monitoring rounds; and to consider the spending of any further funds that we receive by way of asset sales. I give a clear undertaking that the Executive will continue to review and revise the Budget as necessary. Any responsible Executive would do that." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p147, col 2].

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I will complete my point and then I will give way to Mr Hamilton. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr O'Loan: There is a certain innocence about Mr Robinson's statement at that time. He said that we could revise the Budget by way of monitoring rounds, and that we would consider how to deal with further asset sales that were going to happen. The world has turned upside down since then, and not only have there been no extra sales, but the original asset sales that were predicted have not happened.

We know what has become of the mechanism of monitoring rounds, but considering the overall principle of what he was saying, it would be madness for any Finance Minister to bring forward a Budget and state that it will sit there for three years. However, that has been the stance taken by successive Finance Ministers in the round, and we are worse off for it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I said that I would give way to Mr Hamilton initially, and I am happy to give way to the Minister.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not know what planet the Member is living on. First, we have reallocated hundreds of millions of pounds over the monitoring rounds as easements and reduced requirements have occurred, and we have directed money towards other priorities.

Secondly, we have reviewed the Budget. We have had two debates about that in the House. I am now being criticised for reviewing the Budget to the tune of nearly £400 million. Who says that the Budget is set in stone? In-year monitoring has allowed hundreds of millions of pounds to be reallocated. This review has allowed nearly £400 million to be reallocated. I do not know where the Member is coming from with his

idea that we are going down a mad route of not responding to changed circumstances.

Mr O'Loan: I will reply to the Minister before I defer to Mr Hamilton.

I do not want to engage in a polemical debate over this. I am surprised that the Minister uses the opportunity offered by the monitoring rounds in his defence. There has been good spending by the Departments, and I give credit to the improvements that have been made. DFP has been instrumental in producing that good outcome, but the effect of that has been that it has become clear to everyone that monitoring rounds have become highly unsatisfactory as a vehicle for dealing with pressures. Everyone recognises that as a problem.

What we are being presented with at the moment in addressing the £370 million shortfall in the Budget for next year is not a review: it is a way of dealing with a crisis that has emerged in the finances, and nothing more than that.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for giving way. The point that I initially wanted to make has in part been made by the Finance Minister. To be fair to the Member, he used a full quote from the former Finance Minister Mr Robinson. Does he not accept that the point that Mr Robinson made has been proven to be the case? Around £1 billion has been reallocated from one area of the Budget to another in order to address the priorities that he was talking about. Nobody can say that the Budget in this Executive and Assembly has been in any way static over the past number of years.

Mr O'Loan: I remain surprised at the defence of monitoring rounds. I am simply surprised that anyone can offer monitoring rounds as a strategic response to major change in the world economy, which has had huge consequences for us here, as everywhere. I think that a better response is called for.

Mr Hamilton: I made the point in Committee that largesse has not been distributed at certain points in in-year monitoring periods for the past number of years. As the Member acknowledged, that has happened partly because of the need to tackle chronic underspend across Departments.

Does the Member not accept that, despite that difficulty, sizeable volumes of money have been distributed in in-year monitoring rounds? In December 2008, for example, the Executive

targeted £90 million at priority areas in response to the onset of the economic downturn. Does he not accept that the difficulties in in-year monitoring processes would be inherent in any Budget review? The pain that some people believe is attributable to the redistributions and the £370 million of adjustments would be the same in a Budget process.

Mr O'Loan: We made our points, and we should move on. However, I find it surprising that anyone would argue that, after two years, we will not have learned much more about the quality of the work that is undertaken in Departments. It is a surprising argument that we would not have reassessed the most valuable elements of the projects that are being run under the Programme for Government, even if we had not been hit by the economic deluge. Given the economic deluge, there is an opportunity and, indeed, a demand to readdress fundamentally how we use our considerable resources.

The Minister is not in his place, but I praise him for invest to save, which is the single most innovative element of his proposals for next year.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member not accept that invest to save is similar to the concepts that were used under Executive programme funds? The concept has been rebadged after the funds that previously allowed cross-departmental working and improvements were done away with.

Mr O'Loan: I am not sure that invest to save will have that character. Departments will put in bids for individual projects, and those will be assessed.

I want to give the Minister a lot of credit for what he is doing with invest to save. It would have been easy for him to shy away from the concept, given the financial pressures, but he allocated an indicative sum of £26 million to it. If it is at all possible, the Minister should go further and enhance that sum.

As I said to the Minister in Committee last week, it may still be worth addressing cases that could bring a longer-term payback. That can sometimes be quantified, and the Minister knows all about calculations that involve present value. One cannot govern simply with a slide rule. Policy consideration must involve political dimensions and values. We need to think carefully about what is worth doing, and we must have a clear set of social values. Invest

to save is a desirable concept, and I urge the Minister to make the most of it.

11.45 am

I want to link the Bain report on the location of public sector jobs to the collapse of Workplace 2010 and, indeed, to invest to save. I am disappointed, as I have frequently said in the House, in this Finance Minister's reaction to the Bain report on the location of public sector jobs. I still find it baffling that a Department could commission such a report in a positive and enthusiastic manner, and then for the Minister at that time, who was not the Minister who commissioned the report, to be cautious about it, to say the least, when it came in. The report's conclusions cannot have been all that different from the expectations when it was commissioned. The present Finance Minister has continued with that cautiousness, and that is a political mistake.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I was going to quote some things that the Minister has said, but I am content to allow him to put his own interpretation on them.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Maybe I can save the Member from having to quote on the issue at all. I am alarmed that he said that I was cautious about the Bain report. I could not have been more forthright. I do not believe that it is deliverable; that it represents value for money, which is what the report itself said; that the £40 million that would be required to redistribute the proposed number of jobs would be regarded as good expenditure; or that it would even achieve the Member's hoped for objectives, namely, the dispersal of jobs. The report's recommendations would simply move people around and have them travel more, except to different locations. Therefore, I hope that the Member will not describe me as being cautious about the Bain report, because I do not like being described as cautious. I would rather be seen as forthright.

Mr O'Loan: I am disappointed, because one always tries to let people down gently. *[Laughter.]* One also tries to be optimistic in the hope of getting some positive movement from the Minister. I do not find in the report the figure of £40 million that he quotes. I could say more about the costings in the report, and I urge Members to read its detail. Figures are

very often quoted in the Chamber and then re-quoted, and they suddenly become biblical truths. However, they are not always biblical truths, and that is the case in this instance.

I will quote one or two things that the Minister said. He referred to the importance of improving our infrastructure, and said, basically, that doing that would do the job far more effectively than Bain's recommendations. He said:

"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." — *[Official Report, Vol 47, No 5, p264, col 1].*

I agree with all that, except:

"rather than on the Bain report".

The Minister is absolutely right that developing our infrastructure through building roads, providing high-quality broadband, and so on will play a part in equalising economic distribution. However, it will play only a part. There will still be an emphasis on economic development in one section of Northern Ireland — in fact, in one section of Ireland as a whole. That factor needs to be brought in, and I will come back to that.

The independent Barnett review into economic policy that was commissioned by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment specifically said that government needs to play its part in ensuring equitable distribution of economic benefit, because the market, if left to itself, will create geographical strong points in the economy, and a deliberate governmental policy is needed to counter that.

I was again disappointed when, during the Bain debate, the Minister raised points that were beneath him. He referred to my party's headquarters being in Belfast. The Bain report says that the headquarters of organisations should remain in Belfast, and I accept that. There has to be some recognition that the strategic centre of such an organisation has to be co-located with and adjacent to the Assembly. Broadly speaking, that is a valid point. The Bain report makes that point, and goes on to lay out a plan for a wider distribution of other sections of organisations.

I will relate this to Workplace 2010. That was a very ambitious programme to upgrade a large proportion of the Civil Service estate by involving private finance. Let us recall that the aim was to provide an estate that would be fit for purpose for a modern office environment, which the existing estate is not. It was also intended to produce an estate that was much more efficient to run. First, it was to be much more energy efficient, and, secondly, the area needed for each staff member was to be considerably smaller, so the savings would have been very considerable.

I relate this also to the invest to save concept. If one integrates the Bain report, the invest to save idea, and the principle of what it was intended to achieve through Workplace 2010, that produces a coherent set of policies. I urge the Minister and all Members to think carefully about that point; it has real validity.

This comes down to politics being about what we want to achieve; having a view of the kind of society that we want and setting out to realise it. It is about doing that rather than saying it is just too big a difficulty; I create this figure of £40 million; I cannot tackle it; I will do nothing, and I surrender — that is not the best approach that we can get from the Minister. *[Interruption.]*

I want to refer again to the —

Mr Storey: What the Member has said puzzles me in many respects. He and I represent the same constituency. He is well aware of the support in that constituency for the redistribution of public sector jobs in order to secure current employment and to build on it. Let us consider County Hall in Ballymena as an example. The SDLP's view to date on the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA), which the Education Minister and I will deal with later, is that, in order to get huge savings, there must be the collapse of the five education and library boards. That would invariably mean that the jobs that are currently located in County Hall would be lost. Even if we accept the Member's point that there is some rationale in locating some of those services close to this Building, surely, he and I ought to be ensuring that the jobs that currently exist in places such as Ballymena are protected, to ensure that our constituency does not lose out in the event of any other reorganisation of the Government estate.

Mr O'Loan: I am sure that the Member does not mean that there cannot be restructuring of our governmental system. We all recognise that at times that will be necessary. The whole point about the Bain report is that, in the context of that restructuring, the location of the jobs is re-aligned in a strategic way. One should not leave it simply to the call of individual Departments, but should give an overview. The Bain report listed 13 different bodies that were all necessarily restructuring and recommended that we consider the relocation of those in that context. That meaningfully addresses the Member's point.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel:

I thank the Member for giving way. The Bain report was also about people. In particular, a number of women in the Senior Civil Service had to bypass promotion because they wanted to be closer to their families. The Bain report was also about choice and whether people wanted to travel to work. That applied, particularly, to women with families, who had to forego promotion in order to work in Belfast.

Mr O'Loan: The Member makes a valid point. Those kinds of social issues must come into the thinking on that matter. As I suggested earlier, one simply cannot govern by slide rule.

I refer to the Confederation of British Industry's (CBI) response to the Executive's spending plans for 2010-11. A document cannot be quantified in the way in which I am about to do; however, I note that the CBI managed to produce half a page of points of welcome and two pages of critique and concerns. That comes from a leading voice of business in Northern Ireland. Given that much of the defence of the Budget is that it is a Budget for the economy, it is perhaps a little bit surprising that that significant voice of business is so lacklustre in its welcome for the direction in which the Minister is taking us.

The CBI is very concerned about the lack of clarity on the gross capital expenditure that is likely in 2010-11, which it believes is likely to fall by between 10% and 15% on the 2009-2010 levels. It states:

"Maintaining capital expenditure is critical not only to improving public services but as a significant stimulus to the economy".

That is a point that we have made often.

I see that the Minister wishes to get to his feet again.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I congratulate the Member on understanding what debate is about and being prepared to give way, which is unlike the spokesman for the Ulster Unionist Party. I appreciate that the Member has given way.

The Member made a point about the CBI and its criticism of the Budget. We in Northern Ireland know that it is always easier to criticise than it is to find points of agreement. The Member talked about:

“the direction in which the Minister is taking us.”

Again, I hammer home the message that this is an Executive Budget. It was agreed unanimously by the Executive. Therefore, it has the fingerprints of his party leader all over it. It is not the direction in which this Assembly is being dragged along by me; it is the direction in which this Assembly is being pointed by a corporate decision of the Executive, which includes the Member's party leader. I am sure that the Member does not want to annoy her so early in her new position.

Mr O’Loan: I am not troubled by the Minister's intervention. He will know that the SDLP has been extremely forthright in its consideration of how the Budget is used. We have stated, over a period of years and with absolute clarity, that a very different process should be used around creating the Budget. Clearly, that is the position that the Minister for Social Development, who is now our party leader, brought forward strongly at Executive level. She would endorse every word that I am saying.

In relation to public services, the CBI states:

“Failure to grasp the opportunity of more fundamental reform and restructuring could put services at risk. We believe there is significant scope to redesign, re-engineer and reform public services to deliver enhanced services and better outcomes.”

I do not agree with every comment that the CBI makes, but there is significant merit in that one. For all our talk of efficiency savings over the past two or three years, we have not embarked seriously on the issue of public sector reform. Most importantly, we do no service to the more disadvantaged in this community if we accept a public service that does not use its resources in the best way possible; that is, a public service

that neither reduces the amount of resources that it uses nor gets better value out of those resources. We have a long way to go in that regard. I find it a matter of regret that there is so little real political debate here.

12.00 noon

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for being so generous in accepting my interventions. I hope that, in reading the document to which he refers, he has fully understood the point that the CBI makes. The part that he has cited is CBI-speak for the privatisation and introduction to the private sector of the delivery of many of our public services. I am happy to debate that. Indeed, I have some sympathy with that view, but will the Member clarify whether that is the SDLP's new position? I have always understood that the SDLP is the first to protest when any suggestion is made of private involvement in the public sector.

Mr O’Loan: I do not accept the Minister's point. There may or may not be a case for private sector involvement. The point is to start a serious examination of how we deliver public services. That may result in one outcome or another. It may simply result in a better way of running public sector business. It may lead to a degree of outsourcing some of that service or an alteration of the public/private mix. I have no difficulty engaging in that debate.

The CBI goes on to refer to “improving workforce management”. It compares Civil Service absence rates with those in the private sector. That is an issue that causes the Minister of Finance and Personnel a considerable problem, and he knows it. The CBI document mentions “better utilisation of existing assets” and talks about the need to “‘sweat’ existing assets much harder”, including the schools estate and hospital services. However, I would also include making better use of the Civil Service office estate, as I said earlier. We must accept that our existing Civil Service office estate is simply not fit for purpose. If the Minister does not like Bain, having witnessed the collapse of Workplace 2010, I ask what he is offering as the new way forward. That new way forward has yet to be offered. I certainly would not swallow everything that the CBI says hook, line and sinker, but there is merit in considering the points that it makes. The CBI is a far from enthusiastic supporter of the Budget.

I want to comment on the economy, because our Budget is extremely linked to it. We remain in the position of not finding the Holy Grail — the remedy that will significantly alter our budgetary position of sitting at 80% of the UK's average per capita output — and the prognosis is that that situation will continue. Even the recent IREP report to which I referred earlier contains nothing to suggest that there is a game plan to get us out of that position.

I also want to comment on the North/South dimension and on issues that the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Jennifer McCann, raised, including fiscal autonomy and the Barnett formula. I do not see how we will begin to get out of the economic doldrums that we have been in for decades — we are at a particularly low point at the moment — unless we start to plan our economy on a whole-island basis. Let us accept that, for now, we are where we are. Northern Ireland remains a part of the United Kingdom, but it is on the island of Ireland. Unless we start to use all the existing linkages and assets, we will not prosper. I have no doubt that we are —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I will.

Mr B McCrea: I would like the Member to explain the point that he has just made. He appears to suggest that the economy of the Republic of Ireland is sufficiently large to compete in a global economy. All accepted wisdom is that economies of scale from larger economic blocs are needed. The United Kingdom is able to compete worldwide; the Republic of Ireland is not. Such issues arise if one considers the number of trading partners in Europe. I cannot understand why the Member tries to tie our economy more closely to one that adds little in scale and has its own fiscal problems.

Mr O'Loan: I do not accept the Member's point about scale. One could give counter examples of any number of small, niche economies around the world; Luxembourg comes to mind. Therefore, the Member's point about scale makes no sense. On the other hand, a small economy that sets out to be isolationist will not survive in the modern, open global economy. I argue for openness. Let us use all the links that we have to the best of our ability. For all the Minister's pragmatism — he referred to the North/South dimension yesterday — we have not begun to tap into our relationship with the

South. We politically resist opportunities that would greatly benefit us, and we must start to use every one of them.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I would prefer to move on. However, if the Member wishes to say something —

Mr B McCrea: As the Member gave way somewhat reluctantly, I thank him for doing so. I am interested in the issue, and the Member has not explained why we would want to do as he suggested. There are other issues, such as foreign direct investment from the United States, for which this part of the island of Ireland is in direct competition with the other part. Surely it would be better to identify and deal with areas in which we can reap the biggest reward for our efforts. I think, in particular, of the huge economy in the north-west of England. Where are the plans to develop those links or consider our links with the rest of the Commonwealth? The Member and I have attended events at which many countries from around the world were represented. Why can we not try to exploit our relationship with South Africa, New Zealand, Rwanda or Peru? Given that we already have many free trade institutions in place, why is there such a fixation on one small part of the world?

Mr O'Loan: The Member will not find me slow to embrace all international linkages, which is why I attended the events to which he referred. However, there is particular emphasis on Ireland because Northern Ireland is situated on the island of Ireland, and our economies and societies are inextricably bound up with each other, so we should not continue to create artificial barriers.

I could quote much evidence on the subject; however, just yesterday, in this Building, although not in the Chamber, I listened to an important debate on our involvement in and maximising our potential with the EU. People who visited the EU recently reported on the weakness of our engagement with it. They commented on our European political representatives' weak interaction and their poor links with the Assembly. In addition, they pointed out the lack of secretariat support in recognising and influencing what happens in Europe. In so many ways, we are not engaged in the action in Europe to the same extent as others or to the extent that we need to be.

I refer again to the situation in the South of Ireland, which is experiencing massive economic problems. I said before — I repeat it now — that I envied the Irish people their problems, because, at the end of the day, they are masters of their own fate, and they know it. When they have a problem, they and only they can address it, as they are doing now. As a devolved region, we do not have those same controls.

Jennifer McCann's remarks about fiscal autonomy opened up a debate about the Barnett formula, through which some people naturally fear we may end up in a worse position. Nevertheless, I am convinced that we must take more control of our own affairs. If we take more control of our affairs and use the linkages that exist to the south of us as well as to the east of us, that will be the beginning. There needs to be a lot more built on that, but I fundamentally believe that we need to move forward in that direction.

I want to refer to spatial planning, which is one element of economic planning. Doing spatial planning on this island as two separate exercises can be nothing but damaging to how we go forward. How can we plan our infrastructure? To refer to the earlier debate on the Minister's point, how important is infrastructure to economic development? How can we talk about our infrastructure in terms of roads, seaports and airports? Our communication systems involve broadband nowadays, and there so many aspects to that, but how can we discuss that in two separate sections on this island and hope to get the best outcome for all of us? I just cannot conceive of that.

It is not just a technocratic exercise where you do all the sums and the answer churns out at the end; it involves consideration of what kind of society we want. The whole east of the island has the weight of the economic development, which raises major questions about the economic sustainability of the rest of the island and the fundamental question about what kind of society we want to see. We need to bring our values to that, and we need to bring our political views to that and have clear and open debate. However, let us be clear on the terms of that debate before it happens.

Mr Weir: Does the Member acknowledge that the weight of the economic development on the east of the island of Ireland might have less to do with the evils of partition and the lack of a

joined-up spatial plan across the island than with the fact that that is where the access to the markets is?

Mr O'Loan: The Member makes some point. The free market will create its own momentum in relation to these things. You have to go along with some of that, and that point was made in the Barnett report, but it does not mean that we simply allow the free market to dictate in its entirety the type of society that we create. That is where our political influence comes to bear.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I am becoming increasingly reluctant to do so.

Mr Weir: The Minister — sorry, the Member; that was a Freudian slip — talks about a government-inspired shift in spatial planning rather than simply relying on the market. Does the Member agree that the last person, from a governmental point of view, who tried to make a massive population and spatial shift from the east coast to the west coast was Oliver Cromwell and that that was not universally welcomed?

Mr O'Loan: We have disappeared from rational debate, so I will not respond to that.

I want to comment on banks and NAMA, because they are of huge importance to our economy. There is no point in having serious talk about the Budget unless we are reflecting on the economy as well. Much has been said about NAMA. It is certainly not without risk, but, at a minimum, it is a serious attempt to address a problem that threatens us in a very serious way. Unless we can get our banks operating as serious lending institutions again, the consequences for our economy are serious. The Minister has recognised that NAMA is very relevant to us, and I welcome the fact that he is involved in putting one or two independent members on its advisory panel. He is wise to do that, and I urge him to continue keeping a close watch on the situation, because it will develop as the years go on.

12.15 pm

I am thinking now about the situation with the banks. Banks here are in a different situation to those in the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain. I fear that even if all goes well with NAMA with respect to the properties in Northern Ireland — I hope that it does — we may be hit by greater problems than those we are facing at present

in the ability and willingness of our banks to lend to local businesses. Due to the recession, it is likely that the demand from businesses for money is not as great as it would be ordinarily. We look to a time of upturn. However, I fear that banks will still not be in a position to lend. As far as the Committees are concerned, I believe that we have established that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has primacy in matters relating to banking. I also assume that the lead at departmental level is with DETI, and I urge that Department to take this point very much to its notice and consider that banks here are a separate entity to those elsewhere and require a particular policy initiative.

I want to refer to PIIGS but not the kind that are dealt with by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It is the acronym for euro zone countries whose budgets are seriously challenged at present; in particular, Greece.

Mr B McCrea: For information purposes, will the Member identify the countries in the PIIGS grouping?

Mr O'Loan: I am sure that the Member is well aware that the acronym refers to Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain. Although it might seem esoteric to the Budget debate, I am referring to PIIGS because, if outcomes in those countries are not good, our little debate here today may be irrelevant.

The Assembly must watch what is going on in the euro zone at present. Hedge funds containing massive resources are betting against the euro, and Greece is the first target. If the euro were to collapse in Greece and the country had to pull out of the euro zone, the potential domino effect would be serious for us. The economy is now global, and we depend very much on economic stability. Even though the United Kingdom is outside the euro zone, the stability of the zone is extremely important to us. It is important to our local firms, many of which export into the euro zone. Therefore, the Assembly must take that seriously.

Although I believe that Greece should face serious challenges, serious questions should also be asked about whether, in all honesty, the country satisfied the convergence criteria when it entered the euro zone. However, it is in the euro zone, and the problem must be tackled. It is not wise for the euro zone to turn its back on Greece. It should insist on the hard remedies that the Irish economy has had to take. I believe

that the point that Mr McCrea hinted at earlier was that one of the "I"s in PIIGS stands for Ireland. Ireland has taken harsh medicine, and it is important that Greece does the same.

It is also important that there is international solidarity with any threatened economy against those hedge funds. Britain, even though it is outside the euro zone, should play its part in working towards that solidarity politically.

Mr B McCrea: The Member made a point about Greece. Is he suggesting that it was only some sort of Machiavellian plot by hedge funds that created Greece's problems, or does he accept that there are serious structural financial problems in the country that must be addressed? Furthermore, how would he deal with civil unrest due to the austerity programmes that would be introduced to deal with those problems? Would he simply tell the Governments that they have to tough it out?

Mr O'Loan: The Member made a perfectly proper point, which I addressed. In many ways, Greece has been the author of its own misfortune, and it must put its house in order. However, aligned with that, I still think that there should be political and economic support for a country in the euro zone that is going through difficulties.

I move now to a more minor but local point — the boiler scrappage scheme. The Chancellor introduced a boiler scrappage scheme for, I presume, England and Wales or possibly only England. That scheme was greatly welcomed, because it is an encouragement for people to upgrade that source of energy supply in their home. It will also contribute much to improving their energy efficiency and reducing their carbon footprint. I have been disappointed in how negatively unambitiously we have tackled that issue. DSD is considering the potential to include a boiler scrappage scheme in the warm homes scheme. If such a scheme is introduced, it will be in the context of fuel poverty, and it will be severely means-tested. That means that many people in the community will not benefit from it.

I enquired whether there was a Barnett consequential to the scheme. There is a modest consequential of £0.7 million. However, rather than say that we will merely submerge that sum into the general accounts, which is the current reply, a more imaginative approach would have been to talk it up to some degree and offer people the incentive to upgrade their boiler. That

would not require a massive sum of money. In other words, we should do our best to replicate the scheme that the Chancellor introduced in England. That would be an imaginative thing to do, and the Assembly would welcome it and would be seen to be doing a good thing that is going in the direction that many people want to go. A significant cost is involved in changing over, and introducing such a scheme would encourage people to make such a changeover. Many more people, even those who received the cash incentive, would change over, because a lot of attention would be attracted to the concept and a wave of change would be created. If the Minister introduced such a scheme, it would be a good incentive for people.

In some ways, if we do not get the big picture right, the issues that are being debated are merely academic. The big picture relates to our political situation and political disagreements. Today, we heard the news that we are spending government money on advertising the Hillsborough agreement. I think that that is rather sad. I was at Hillsborough, and there was a blockade of cameras and journalists outside Hillsborough Castle. We did not need to seek the attention that the media were paying to the agreement. I do not know why we feel that we need to spend government money on advertising something in which the media has such an intense interest. Conducting such an exercise seems to be scraping the barrel of political activity. However, I want to speak about the matter more generally. Why were we at Hillsborough? We were there because the political structures, which were hard wrought over many years, were not being used. The political structures are not ideal, and they are not the structures for an ordinary society. However, this is not an ordinary society, and the structures are the best that we can create to deal with an extraordinary society. Those structures were being manipulated at Hillsborough, particularly by two parties that were using and milking them for their own advantage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to come back to the motion.

Mr O'Loan: As I said at the outset, this is one section of my speech. I heard what you said, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I will try to be as brief as possible. However, something needs to be said. If we do not get this right, all the other talk about our Budget and economy goes nowhere. That is why what I am saying is relevant. I think that it was the Speaker and not you, Mr Deputy

Speaker, who said at the outset of the debate that almost everything has its place in a Budget debate. He was right.

We were at Hillsborough because the two largest parties were not using the political structures in the interests of all. In the day-to-day dynamics in particular, they were not involving the other parties in the process of government. As a result, we had the 153-day stalemate in 2008, and then we had a crisis that almost collapsed the Assembly a month ago. We have a process of negotiation, but how do we conduct that process of negotiation? The two largest parties take the lead and involve the other two parties in the Executive to a very limited extent, to say the least.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I know that what the Member is saying may be relevant to where we are at. However, the Member needs to return to the Budget Bill. The Business Committee has agreed to meet at 12.30 pm. Can the Member indicate whether he will be finished by then?

Mr O'Loan: I will be finished before then. One of the major elements to come out of the political talks at Hillsborough was the fact that the two largest parties were to lead the discussion on parades. That is most unwise. If we are to get anywhere, we need to get back to the principles of the Good Friday Agreement and work together in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland so that we can provide them with the economy, Health Service and education system for which they are crying out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the first Member to be called to speak will be Stephen Farry.

The sitting was suspended at 12.27 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Dr Farry: It is with pleasure that I take the opportunity to make a few short remarks on the Budget Bill. It is fair to say that we have had a rather wide-ranging debate so far, covering topics such as Oliver Cromwell and the Hillsborough agreement, and we have taken a trip around the world's economies. I will try to stick as far as possible to the principles of the Bill and to the context of public finances in Northern Ireland, which is what we are here to discuss.

In essence, the Alliance Party had three criticisms of the original Budget that the Executive set. That Budget did not address the cost of division by trying to reorient our society, it did not rebalance or modernise our economy by trying to tackle the major structural problems and it did not properly sustain public services. All three points are still valid today, and, perhaps, they are even more valid.

I now move on to some of the comments that other Members made. A great deal of comment was made on the subject of tax-varying powers, and Jennifer McCann has been as vocal as my party in asking for those powers to be given to Northern Ireland. Tax-varying powers can work in two ways. First, they can increase revenue take if that is the choice that we make as a society. Secondly, they can create financial incentives for economic change in our society. It is in that context that we should most consider those powers.

Today's debate is particularly relevant when set against the launch of the new Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group think tank, which has renewed calls for a differential rate of corporation tax for Northern Ireland. Although I appreciate that that issue has been raised in the past and rebuffed by the UK Treasury, the Assembly, and the Executive in particular, must keep it alive. Economists have identified it as the best tool for making a major step change in our economic condition, and if we want to rebalance our economy, we should use it.

I also appreciate that if we went down the road of introducing a lower rate of corporation tax, the loss of revenue would have to come out of the block grant. We would have to make that choice. However, we are already doing that through the decision that we as a body made to defer water charges for a further year. That revenue had to be found from somewhere, because it was not

provided for originally in the block grant, and we have had to forgo that money. All that rather begs the question of what will actually make the biggest difference if we are to transform our economy. Will it be a differential rate of corporation tax, which has the potential to bring in new investment and encourage economic activity? Will it be a deferral of water charges, which is effectively a standstill approach that may save people money today but that will not fundamentally change the underlying context of our society?

While I am on the topic of revenue raising, I may as well return to the subject of the regional rate, on which the House will be having a fuller debate next week. The Executive have presented the freeze in the regional rate as a virtue and a means by which they are easing the cost pressures that households and businesses face during the economic downturn. That may be true today, but it was not the objective when that policy was set in 2008 as part of the three-year Budget, which was well before there was an economic downturn or any talk of one. The Alliance Party is not advocating massive hikes in the regional rate; far from it. However, it feels that it should form part of the Assembly's armoury.

It is noticeable that Northern Ireland, unlike virtually every other jurisdiction, is seeking to address its financial shortfalls purely through cuts in public spending. I appreciate the DUP's position on that issue, but the four parties in the Executive took that decision collectively. To say the least, I am surprised that the SDLP and Sinn Féin, which both purport to be social democratic parties, would support an approach that is based solely on the cutting of revenue.

Mr O'Loan: I thought that Mr Farry was above such cheap, erroneous point scoring. I take it that he will accept that we have presented a different process for addressing the Budget, from which we would certainly have expected a different outcome.

Dr Farry: I was going to come to that point later. The SDLP is heavy on process but light on tough decisions on the income and expenditure choices facing us. The point stands. In Westminster, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour Party agree that addressing the financial gap involves a mixture of tax rises and expenditure cuts. They are divided on when they should start rowing back on the massive national debt and the

precise mixture of the tools available. It is only in Northern Ireland that we are taking a solitary approach based on public spending cuts to address the balance. We are well outside the European, and indeed the wider, mainstream on that issue. Both the SDLP and Sinn Féin need to reflect seriously on that, because —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I have not come to you yet.

Mr B McCrea: I am waiting with eager anticipation. I want a bit of clarity. The Member has, I think, chastised this place for relying solely on fiscal cuts, but he seems to be arguing that we should be raising additional revenue. Is that the point that the Member is making?

Dr Farry: If the Member had listened to what I said yesterday, in previous debates, and to what I am saying today, that would have been clear. I am sticking my head above the parapet on a political kamikaze run. The Assembly has to face up to difficult choices. Mr McCrea and Mr O'Loan referred to the austerity measures in the Republic of Ireland as if they were a virtue, and spoke about how well the Government there are doing in addressing their Budget and taking tough decisions; yet here they back away from such decisions quite dramatically.

We have to overcome the taboo that we cannot in any circumstances seek to increase the rate of revenue raised from the people of Northern Ireland. That is simply not sustainable. There will come a time — if not during the forthcoming financial year then in future financial years — when the Assembly will have to address issues regarding the regional rate and water charges. The question is not whether that will happen; it is when it will happen. There is no fundamental issue at stake. We are saying as a party that we have to face up to those choices. Others are not prepared to be as straight with the people of Northern Ireland as we are.

What we suggest — an inflation-based rise in the regional rate — would amount to about 20p or 30p per week for the average household in Northern Ireland. Had that had been done over the past two or three years, it would have raised an extra £25 million or £30 million for the Executive. That may not be a huge amount of money, but, in conjunction with other measures to soften some of the harsh cuts that are affecting our public services, it could have made a difference.

The Minister rightly made the point — while recognising that we made the argument about equality — that the freezing of regional rates and water charges tends to benefit the better off rather than the worse off. It is, in effect, a regressive subsidy. Most economists in this island and further afield recognise that. The Minister rightly made the point that people on the margins are affected by such decisions, and I concur. However, the way to respond to that comment is to recognise that the issue is not whether revenue-raising powers should be introduced but how that should be done and the fairness of the measures that are taken. The value of a property is a blunt instrument in assessing ability to pay water charges or property taxes. It is not a bad method, but there are better ways of doing it.

The issue is how to finesse around the edges to ensure that people on the margins are not affected adversely by those measures. However, there are some people who are able to pay increases in regional rates and water charges quite comfortably. Those people should be making their contribution to society, particularly when others who depend on public services are suffering.

Ideally, the regional rate and the district rate would both rise at the rate of inflation. Some councils in Northern Ireland have introduced hikes in their rates of 7% and although the Executive have frozen the regional rate, the net effect is still a rise in rates. More action by councils to control their costs would probably have exactly the same net effect on the people of Northern Ireland as the Executive having responsibility for revenue raising, and both those measures would mean that we would all be better off.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member has drawn an interesting parallel in referring to the way that some local councils have sought to deal with the pressures that they face by increasing the district rate. Is there not a real danger that if we were to go down the route to which the Member refers, by giving more emphasis to the Assembly's having revenue-raising ability, we would fall into the same trap as councils? Councils should be looking for efficiencies but they have not, and they have consequently increased the district rate. Equally, if the Assembly were to use the regional rate as a safety valve, it might stop Ministers and, indeed, the Assembly from

looking for the real efficiencies that can still be found from the money that we spend.

Dr Farry: I acknowledge the Minister's comments. Earlier in the debate and at last week's meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, he made the point that it is important to ensure that people see inefficiencies being taken out of the system before additional revenue raising is considered. That is true to an extent, but there are distortions in the way that public finances are addressed in Northern Ireland. The average household contribution in Northern Ireland is still lower than the average in the rest of the UK, which suggests a certain imbalance towards here. The Treasury may not have drawn that to our attention to date, but, at some stage, we may have to come to terms with that structural imbalance in UK public financing. Indeed, if the Barnett formula were to be reopened, that might be an obvious line of attack for those seeking to tighten public expenditure at a wider UK level.

The Barnett formula in general was mentioned. The Alliance Party was the only party in the Assembly to respond to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Barnett Formula. It is probably wise to play safe with the current formula. Over time, it will converge to parity, but it may well be a case of better the devil you know, because any needs-based system will be based around a number of subjective determinations. There is no settled objective definition of what is meant by need, and if we were to lose the debate, Northern Ireland could suffer as a consequence. That point was drawn out in the evidence to the House of Lords Committee.

The need for an all-island dimension to the economy was mentioned. The issue needs to be separated into two aspects: the financial aspect and the economic aspect. It is perfectly clear that, financially, we depend on London for a subvention of some £8 billion a year. It is one thing for London and the UK economy as a whole to subsidise Northern Ireland, but if that cost were passed to Dublin, particularly in the current situation, that state would be bankrupted. I appreciate the point that, in the long run, the financial situation may well change, but as we stand, that argument is not a runner.

2.15 pm

There are economic opportunities to do things better and differently on an all-island basis. I fully acknowledge that there is some distortion

of economic and social policy, whether it be spatial planning, the provision of services, or unnecessary duplication, because of the border. Equally, there is the issue of competition. My party is more than happy to engage in discussions about that. We contend that the cost of division in our society is a source of —

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: The Member raised the issue of competition. Does he agree that we could strengthen our global, competitive advantage by looking at investment on an all-island basis?

Dr Farry: I do not disagree with what the Member is saying. Leaving aside the political dimension and the principle of consent, there are opportunities to do things on an all-island basis, such as promoting tourism or aspects of the green economy. Equally, there are opportunities for us to compete with the Republic of Ireland for inward investment. A mixed approach is probably the best one for now, and we should keep politics out of that as best we can.

Basil McCrea made some interesting interventions about the comparisons between the economy of the Republic of Ireland and that of the UK and about which one is better placed to compete on the international stage. I do not think that Northern Ireland must choose either a UK dimension or an all-island dimension. We can do both — that is the opportunity that this region has. It is important that we consider the economies of the UK and the Republic of Ireland or all-island in the wider context of the European Union. I am a strong supporter of the European Union. I do not think that the euro caused the huge problems in the Republic of Ireland or Greece. Those problems were caused by reckless speculation and spending. The housing bubble south of the border was based on sand rather than on any fundamental realities in that economy, and we are seeing a major readjustment. Neither the euro nor the approach to Europe as a whole was to blame for that.

I welcome the concept of invest to save, and I highlight that the cost of division is one area where that approach can be adopted. We must recognise that, in trying to reorientate the way in which we provide goods, facilities and services in a divided society, some upfront expenditure will be required to unlock savings elsewhere. I encourage Departments to think in those terms and DFP to show leadership in

encouraging them to do so. I rather suspect that Departments will make many claims for the modest sums that have been allocated to the invest to save fund so far. However, if they are prepared to come forward in the way in which I suggested, that is to be welcomed.

Mr Speaker, with your indulgence, I want to make a brief comment about the Hillsborough agreement, which David McNarry and Declan O'Loan have already mentioned. I am not going to go into the wider political dimensions of that, because I do not think that that is appropriate today. I want to comment on the agreement in the context of the Budget and our economic and financial situation. I recognise that the Hillsborough agreement is a fix, but it was a necessary fix to address many of the poor relationships that have built up within our structures over recent years and, particularly, in recent months. Issues that have been caught in a logjam needed to be freed so that we can move on. If things look unusual — for example, £20 million being spent on language when there are other pressing needs — people need to take a step back and put that into the wider context. If this does not succeed, this society will be in very serious trouble. If the institutions collapse and we return to a form of direct rule or joint authority, there will be major financial and economic implications for Northern Ireland, not least the loss of international credibility and investment, never mind the cost implications of further polarisation on the streets of Northern Ireland.

Therefore, there is a huge, but perhaps hidden, financial and economic imperative to get on and seal the deal. I appreciate that things are very fragile at the moment, and it is important that we do not seek to undermine that. I am not happy with every detail of the Hillsborough agreement. However, most people in Northern Ireland are not focused on the minutiae of that; they are focused on getting stability back so that they can get on with their lives and see the Assembly address bread-and-butter issues. Let us look at where we are in that wider picture. I apologise for making that point, Mr Speaker, and I appreciate your indulgence. However, it needed to be said given what other Members said earlier.

I recognise that the Budget has been knocked off course by events, some of which were external; for example, the economic recession and the impact on property prices. Other events were self-inflicted; for example, the decision,

freely taken by all parties, to defer water charges beyond the date originally set out in the Budget. We are now faced with the situation in which difficult choices have to be made.

There has been a lot of discussion around process and the way in which we address these matters. The SDLP mentioned a new Budget, and I concur with that party on the limitations of monitoring rounds. One cannot drill down as far as one would like into Departments' existing plans because Departments are in control of what they surrender. Therefore, one cannot scrutinise the real priorities in the Departments. Equally, Members can talk about contingency funds or about making the Budget more efficient with respect to how expenditure is handled. Such discussions are welcome and will make some difference. However, they do not really address the fundamentals and do not balance the books. The only way that we can balance the books is by making tough choices on revenue and on public expenditure. That is the reality of where we are. If Members focus on so-called magic solutions that are not magic solutions at all, they do a great disservice to us and to the people.

Jim Shannon mentioned spending on health, and, perhaps, it is worth focusing on that as one example of where tough decisions have to be made. A lot of Members are disappointed that they have not seen any evidence that the Health Minister is willing to engage. It is likely that things will be imposed on him if he does not engage in a pro-active manner.

I recognise that there are problems with our spend on health. Due to our higher levels of ill health, we start with a much higher need per capita than the rest of the UK. We did get some increased funding through the original Budget. However, despite that, we are continuing to flatline in comparison with the rates of investment elsewhere in the UK, while demand is increasing due to greater numbers of people going through the system, more expensive drugs and more expensive technology.

We have to address the imbalances within the existing health budget; for example, the underfunding of mental health services. Although there may be a funding gap of £300 million or £600 million, depending on the figures, the Health Minister did settle for his budget, and that is something that he has to remember when he makes complaints similar to those that we have heard today.

Although I am sympathetic to the problems facing the health budget, the notion that we could insulate it from any re-examination is unrealistic. In common with any other aspect of public services, there are ways of doing things differently and more efficiently. Every Department benefits from a process of challenge and internal change, and the Health Department is no different. Indeed, perhaps that Department is more in need of that process than others. It is unrealistic to seek to exempt the Health Department, and those who make such an argument have to be straight with the people of Northern Ireland and explain where the money will come from if the health budget is frozen.

I notice that the Ulster Unionist Party is rigorous in opposing water charges, even though that would address imbalances in the health budget in one fell swoop. That party also suggests that if we freeze the health budget, all other aspects of the Budget could take the hit. However, that would mean almost doubling the rate of cuts in almost every other Department in Northern Ireland, including those relating to the economy.

At a time when we are trying to rebalance our economy, cutting back expenditure in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or the Department for Employment and Learning — another Department with an Ulster Unionist Minister — is crazy. That will undermine our ability to transform our society, and we will remain in our current situation with a continued dependency on the public sector and a massive subvention from the UK Treasury.

The emphasis needs to be on our economy; it has to be the number one priority. The economy is the top priority in the Programme for Government and the Budget. I may disagree with how the emphasis is applied, but the economy has to remain the main focus of our society; we cannot continue as we are, because our public finances are not sustainable. We need to bring in more wealth creation and become less dependent on the Treasury by generating more tax revenue in Northern Ireland.

We are seeing the effects of cuts in our economy filtering through. In my constituency, the development of a new art and technology centre, as part of the South Eastern Regional College, has been put on hold. Such a centre would offer training to our young people to help them to become entrepreneurs, start their own businesses, create wealth and employ people.

Therefore, there is a danger that we will lose out and miss what is important for moving our society forward.

I have been on my feet for some time, so I will try to conclude my comments. I reiterate the point that I made yesterday. In the medium to long term, we need to have a proper benchmarking exercise on how we spend money compared with other jurisdictions, particularly our neighbouring jurisdictions. I fully accept that, as a devolved Assembly, we have the right to make our own decisions on our spending priorities and on social, economic and environmental matters. There are areas in which we are doing that sensibly, but there are areas in which we are not. By looking at how other societies balance their expenditure, perhaps we can learn lessons.

There are areas in which our spending is well above the UK average, and there are others in which it is below the UK average. Even in some Departments, the profile of expenditure is radically different from that which one would see elsewhere. The cost of division may be one reason for that, but the issue is much broader. In the medium to long term, we need to look to see where, from an outside perspective, the inefficiencies lie in our public spending and how we can do things better to provide the same level of service to the people of Northern Ireland much more cost-effectively. I welcome the debate, and, no doubt, it will continue over the weeks and months to come.

Mr Bell: I support the Budget. To paraphrase the Finance Minister, a Budget made in Ulster is the best Budget of all. If this House is to mean anything, we must be able to deliver real benefit and bring real change to people. I will point out 14 or 15 key areas in which the Budget will make a real difference to people's lives, not only in my constituency of Strangford but across Northern Ireland. The Budget will deliver real change and a positive way forward.

We have looked at the regional rate, and businesses in Strangford tell me that, to paraphrase Dennis Healey, they have been squeezed until the pips squeak; they have nothing more to give. I congratulate the Minister of Finance and Personnel, because we have sweated the assets of the £13 billion available to us, and both he and his predecessors have shown good stewardship of the economy by freezing the regional rate. That has not been easy, and tough choices have had to be made, but I can tell the Minister that some

businesses in Strangford are operating today purely because the regional rate has been frozen for the past three years. Real jobs and real employment have been sustained, and real businesses have benefited from the hard decisions that were made to freeze the regional rate.

I declare an interest as a member of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, a member of Ards Borough Council, a member of the Committee of the Regions and a governor of Regent House School.

We are in global markets. We find ourselves in competition with China and India. I remember Ian Pearson telling us that Northern Ireland must make tough decisions or China will have our dinner and India will have our tea.

That is the global market in which we operate. It behoves us not only in the Assembly but in individual councils to keep those rates at a level that enables the business community and ratepayers to stay afloat and keep their heads above the water. I congratulate my council, which secured a rate rise of only 0.28% above inflation. That, combined with the regional rate, affords Strangford the opportunity to go forward and compete in the business world.

2.30 pm

Small businesses are the backbone and linchpin of our economy. If we remove small businesses, many of which are family-run, from any constituency in Northern Ireland, economic difficulties will ensue. The small business rate relief scheme in the Budget allowed small businesses to continue to operate in increasingly difficult markets. Although some bigger companies have left Northern Ireland, the small businesses have kept Northern Ireland going, have kept the economy going during years of terrorism and now keep the economy going in times of unprecedented economic recession.

The RPA aims to improve procurement and human resource functions and to increase savings that can be passed on directly to the ratepayer. We seek to provide better shared services, and we aim to deliver those in a manner that is more economically efficient. By doing so, we can pass a direct benefit back to the people. We did that with the regional rate, and we are doing it for small businesses through the RPA.

I turn to one of the major industries in my constituency: construction. Many households

in Portaferry and beyond depend on the construction industry for survival. The main or only breadwinner is employed either directly in the construction industry or in supplying it. Despite the number of people who deny it, the House's courageous decisions on capital spend kept the construction industry afloat. At present, 54% of people employed in the construction industry — more than one in every two — have remained in employment, stayed in their home and survived as breadwinners as a result of the decisions that the House made. That situation is mirrored in the Strangford constituency. That is where the rubber hits the road. We must keep people in employment, make big decisions and support the local economy right through to the household level. That is a fourth area in which the Budget led to gains.

I turn now to the Department for Employment and Learning. Some £203 million has been set aside for the two universities to improve teaching and learning and to provide a constructive challenge for the future. If the priority is education, education, education, the resources should surely follow that mantra. That £203 million will boost teaching and learning and, most critically for universities, which are now research-led to such a great extent, it will boost research. Furthermore, it will keep our universities at the top level, give all our children the opportunity to receive a world-class education in Northern Ireland and prevent the brain drain. That is a fifth area in which the Budget delivered real change for people in Northern Ireland.

DEL has done constructive work to help young people who are not involved in education, employment or training. The Committee for Employment and Learning has shown leadership in addressing the situation of people who genuinely need to be given an opportunity and need a hand up rather than a handout. The Budget delivered for those people. In future, that Committee will want to conduct an inquiry into how the Budget can further help the 50,000 children who are not in any form of education, employment or training.

Mr Storey: Does the Member accept that the situation is extremely serious? In the past number of years, the number of young people who are not in work has risen from approximately 23,000 or 24,000 to more than 50,000. Is that not an indication that, although the allocated money is welcome, we need much more than

money? We require a clear, focused strategy to help those young people because, by and large, they miss out on the economic benefits that arise as a result of the activity around them.

Mr Bell: I fully accept the Member's point. As a social worker for the past 21 years, I worked with young people who, having been the victims of sexual abuse, drug dependency or other chemical dependencies, missed out on their education. The Member is correct that an increase of 27,000 in the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training is unacceptable, and we must reverse that trend. That may have to mean not using more resources but perhaps using the available resources in a smarter way.

The Committee for Employment and Learning heard a brilliant presentation from a young girl who brought herself out of an addiction to crack cocaine. She has been clean for the past nine months and is involved in a proper programme. It may be that we need to use our resources in a smarter way for such young people. The Budget delivered through helping the Prince's Trust, and it gave many young people, as I said earlier, a hand up rather than a handout.

The Budget delivered increased equality to my Ulster-Scots culture. We can point to a number of cultural facilities, such as the refurbished Ulster Museum, and say that those gains for all the people of Northern Ireland were the result of work that was done in the Assembly.

I dealt with agriculture matters during my involvement with the Committee of the Regions. As a result of the Assembly's work on the Budget, £300 million went to the common agricultural policy and directly helped those farmers who are most in need. The Assembly ensured that some £6.7 million was invested directly in farm modernisation to help farmers in my Strangford constituency who depend on aid. The Budget produced real gains for agriculture.

I want to see more work done in education. We must get that process right, and we must do better. I declared an interest as a member of the board of governors of Regent House Grammar School. Many parents choose to use the prep school at Regent House. The Department's contribution to the prep school is £800 per pupil, whereas the corresponding contribution to other good local schools for which I can vouch, such as Castle Gardens Primary School, Newtownards Model Primary

School, Londonderry Primary School and Donaghadee Primary School, is some £1,800. The closure of that prep school will not only contravene equality legislation but will discriminate against many parents who made the choice to send their children there. We must examine that situation carefully. If the closure of the prep school goes ahead — I do not think that it will — the board of governors will be faced with making a number of highly qualified teachers redundant. It would be a shame for that to happen when the Assembly is trying to promote education.

There is a big demand for social housing in Strangford, as elsewhere. We can stand over the fact that, as a result of the Budget, 500 more affordable homes were built. We are well on the way to meeting the target of building 10,000 social houses by 2013. The House can point to the gains that the Budget delivered.

This morning, a part of Portaferry in my constituency was sealed off to facilitate work on a new road. The Castlebawn roundabout and a major new link road have greatly benefited Newtownards. We need to tell people what the Assembly has achieved for them. Real progress has been made in Strangford as a result of a Budget that was made in Northern Ireland.

In the period before the installation of road safety cameras, there were 169 deaths on the roads. Newly released figures show that the number of road deaths is down to 76. There are 93 people alive today because of an effective Budget. We should be trumpeting those significant achievements rather than cynically hiding away from them.

Yesterday's news bulletins carried the unusual story of an ambulance that caught fire and had to be taken away. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety tells us that as a result of the Budget and a multimillion pound investment — his words, not mine — we will move towards a situation in which no Ambulance Service vehicle is more than five years old. Therefore, again because of the work done on the Budget in this House and as that programme is rolled out, no one will have to get into an ambulance that is more than five years old. These are major gains, and 66 new ambulances are already in service.

I listened to Mr McNarry, who was on his "hobbit horse" earlier. There are some who want to walk in two directions on financial policy, and I would

like someone to clarify the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force (UCUNF) financial policy for me. Is it the one that is led by Sylvia Hermon, the darling of the Labour Party — that is, the Alistair Darling of the Labour Party — with no cuts and increased investment, or is it the policy of David McNarry, the junior partner to Ken Clarke, whom he was parroting earlier, which is one of savage cuts? We need to know which of those two financial policies the Ulster Unionist Party will follow. It is going in two different directions. Robert Frost wrote a poem that contained the lines:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —

I took the one less travelled by”.

The import of that is that one can only walk one road. We need to know whether the Ulster Unionist Party wants to take us down the Darling road of Sylvia Hermon or the Ken Clarke road of severe cuts. There is political cowardice in not telling us what cuts it will advocate and where those cuts will be. The UUP can no more walk on two sides of the street at the same time than it can try to walk on both sides of the street in opposite directions. We need to know whether Sylvia Hermon is leading the financial policy for the Ulster Unionist Party, as Darling, or whether it is Ken Clarke.

To be fair, David McNarry quoted Ken Clarke, and I am tempted to use the line that I knew Ken Clarke, and David McNarry, you are no Ken Clarke.

Mr McDevitt: Given that all your parties were present at Hatfield House, perhaps the DUP could throw some light on that issue for those of us on this side of the House.

Mr Bell: The DUP policy is clearly outlined by the Finance Minister, and I suggest that the Member reads it.

We cannot have a financially incompetent position where David McNarry tells us that he is going to impose severe cuts, while in another part of North Down his colleague tells us that there will be fewer cuts and more investment. There needs to be some honesty in their position.

I turn to a serious matter, and I declare an interest as an Orangeman and a sir knight. David McNarry raised the issue of the cost of parading. It is regrettable that he is not in the Chamber, because I wanted to reply to his point, and he would not give way earlier. One of the key members of his party, UCUNF, has

referred in his blog to the Orange Order having “sociopathic tendencies”. I challenge the Ulster Unionists to tell us today whether they stand by that remark. Is it UCUNF policy that the Orange Order has sociopathic tendencies? If so, the anger that they feel when they describe themselves as angry men is nothing compared to what I heard at lunchtime in my constituency. For the record, the story is in the ‘News Letter’ today. It states that the blog was written by Mr Peel, a Conservative member, who claims that anyone who wishes to join the Orange Order has “sociopathic tendencies”. The Ulster Unionists need to tell us the costs associated with those comments, at a time when people are working extremely hard and there is goodwill on all sides to resolve the parading issue.

I commend the Orange Order for showing real leadership. At a time when members of my party and others are working extremely hard to deal with the costs of parading, we cannot have David McNarry’s Ulster Unionists and Conservatives saying that Orangemen have sociopathic tendencies. Those are costly comments. The Orange Order of Dr Barnardo does not have sociopathic tendencies. An explanation is required. If that member is to be expelled, so be it.

2.45 pm

I wish to speak about the all-Ireland economy. I appreciate your laxity, Mr Speaker, in saying that Members can refer to many matters in the debate. Jennifer McCann argued for an all-Ireland economy, and I will attack the argument rather than the person who made it. One should not let the facts get in the way of a good argument, but anyone who argues for an all-Ireland economy is not letting the facts get in the way of a bad argument. It is financially irresponsible to talk of an all-Ireland economy at this time. No economist would agree with the argument, because it is the political equivalent of trying to push water up a hill.

I accept the Member’s point that there must be open minds. However, those open minds should consider the benefit of the power block of the east-west relationship. Our relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom is the primary economic block on which to build and take ourselves forward. It will deliver more jobs and sustain more businesses right across Northern Ireland. Indeed, one could argue that it would

be better to twin with Greece or Iceland than to have an all-Ireland economy.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel:

I was referred to as Alice in Wonderland earlier, but now I am wondering where the White Rabbit is. Does the Member not agree that, although the economic and social needs of his Strangford constituency are perhaps being met, there are people in areas such as the north-west or north and west Belfast who are unemployed and living in poverty? Those communities have not seen the investment that the Member for Strangford has seen in his constituency. Everybody is asking why we would want to join with an economy that is in such dire straits as the South of Ireland. Is the Member saying that it would have been OK to do it several years ago when the Celtic tiger was in play?

Mr Bell: I was in Brussels last Thursday. I saw the heads of state arriving, and I saw the blind panic on their faces at the situation in the euro zone. Is anyone arguing today that we should have placed ourselves in the euro zone? There was fiscal concern and blind panic among those heads of state. I do not want to refer to the Republic of Ireland as a bankrupt country, but that is not far off the mark. People in north and west Belfast and in the west of the Province should look to this Budget, because it delivered a better M2. The east-west economy is a better guarantor of success for those people than an all-Ireland economy.

Mr Campbell: Is it not as straightforward as this: as a Sinn Féin Member indicated, Northern Ireland can either be incorporated into a population of six million inside the euro debacle, or it can remain among a population of 60 million in the sterling zone, with the stability and democracy that that offers us, inside the European Union but outside the euro debacle?

Mr Bell: The Member made his point very well; I cannot add to it.

Dr Farry: Will the Member reflect on the fact that the argument between the euro zone and the sterling zone is overly simplistic? Does he recall that the UK sterling zone had to have recourse to the International Monetary Fund to address its financial situation in the late 1970s? More recently, Iceland, which is not in the euro zone, had to be bailed out. Greece's problems were not caused by the euro zone; they were domestic. Rather, the euro zone

creates a situation in which all the countries in Europe have to show solidarity and rescue any country that falls.

Mr Bell: My learned friend Mr Farry will agree with me that no one, having considered any reasonable length of time, can argue that tying Northern Ireland's interests in with the rest of the United Kingdom is to its economic disadvantage compared to having an all-Ireland economy.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We are now into the realms of global finance, but, since the Speaker invited Members to be as wide-ranging as possible, I hope that he will indulge us.

Will the Member accept that part of the problem for countries in the euro zone, especially small countries, is that their problems are exacerbated by the fact that being in the euro zone has removed from them many of the levers that a country would normally have to control its own fiscal policy, exchange rate and monetary policy? They are tied into what suits the biggest countries, which often does not suit the smaller countries, and, when one country is hit with a shock that maybe does not affect the other countries, they find that they are very restricted in their movement. Therefore, as my honourable friend argued, having flexibility and independence as a result of being outside the euro zone is a remedy to that problem, whereas being in the euro zone is the cause of the problem.

Mr Bell: I can only agree with all those points.

I want to pay tribute to those who spent many hours at Hillsborough. My party leader had six hours' sleep over six days as he sought agreement. I say to Members: do not make the perfect the enemy of the possible.

We have to show the public the difference that we made to the economy and how we kept it at a point at which everyone in Northern Ireland will have an economic advantage. We have to show how we boosted small businesses and the construction industry, achieved savings through procurement and how one in every two construction jobs is a result of work done in this House. We have to show how our farmers walk away with £300 million from the common agricultural policy and £6-7 million for farm modernisation; how our roads are in a more improved state; and how we have 66 new ambulances on the road and a programme that will deliver new ambulances within five years.

Mr B McCrea: Since the Member is on a list of remedies, will he state what plans he or his party have to redress the imbalance between the public and private sectors? Will he freeze wages, or will he cut jobs?

Mr Bell: With respect, that question has come from a party that has just parroted Ken Clarke. It will cut more jobs, people's benefits, the Roads Service, the Health Service and the Department for Social Development, and it is now looking for answers. The answers are there if the Member would look at them. The answers are there in the frozen — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: The answers are there in the frozen regional rate, the small business rates relief and in RPA, in relation to procurement and human resources functions. The answers are there. The Member might not like it, but this House delivered proper construction jobs for people out there.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member has detailed places where the answers may well be for his viewing. However, there are no answers in the Hillsborough agreement. There are processes and working groups, but there is no detail. Will the Member point out to me where the answers and the detail are in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, which OFMDFM is trying to sell across the airwaves?

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to sally into the House not having heard any of the debate or discussion and come in here with, allegedly, some advice? The Member just wanders in here, slithers into her chair and gets up and demands to be heard. How outrageous.

Mr Speaker: Order. I said this morning about how wide the debate may go. However, I also said to Members that it will be vital to try, as far as possible, to stay within the scope of the Bill. The scope has certainly been widened. There is absolutely no doubt about that.

In addition, I am always of the opinion that Members should be in the House for as much of a debate as possible. I know that that is sometimes not easy for Members, but it is important.

Mrs D Kelly: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I thank you for that clarification. As

all Members know, the debate is available for viewing in our own rooms.

Is it in order for the Member opposite to say that a Member "slithers into her chair"?

Mr Speaker: Order. I always advise Members about their use of language in the House and about tempering their language. I remind the House of the importance of the language that Members use.

We are now close to Question Time.

Mr McLaughlin: Further to Lord Morrow's point of order, it seems to me that the Member responded to a Member who had asked the Member who had the Floor to give way. She then responded to the Member who made the intervention. Is that a correct use of asking a Member to give way?

Mr Speaker: I will move on from that point. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Bell: I will conclude. The answers that the honourable Member for Upper Bann seeks lie with the Executive, of which her party leader is a member. Her party leader supports and has endorsed the Budget. I assume that Margaret Ritchie can give the honourable Member the answers that she seeks. However, I will give the Member a quick summary. The Executive have a Minister of Finance and Personnel who has delivered for business through the regional rate and rates relief; he has delivered on the review of public administration; he has delivered for the construction industry, the universities and the agriculture industry; he has delivered greater equality for Ulster Scots, which, in the past, was deprived of its fair share of money; and he has delivered for the Health Service and Roads Service. For all those reasons, I commend the Budget and the good stewardship of the Minister of Finance and Personnel to the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 3.00 pm, the House may take its ease until that time. When the debate resumes, Mr McLaughlin will be the next Member to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL Projects: South Down

1. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a brief summary of the projects planned by his Department for the South Down constituency in the 2010-11 financial year, and the total capital investment in these projects. (AQO 764/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): Seven separate capital projects are planned for the South Down constituency in the 2010-11 financial year. The total capital investment in the projects that are planned for 2010-11 is £1.518 million. Funding for the arts included the allocation of £600,000 out of a total project investment of £1.2 million to Down District Council for the extension to the Down Arts Centre. An allocation of £80,000 out of a total project investment of £107,000 has been made to the Newcastle Glees Musical Society for the refurbishment of its premises.

Funding for sport included the allocation of £49,000 out of a total project investment of £245,000 to St Malachy's GAC in Castlewellan for its sports pitch. An allocation of £49,000 out of a total project investment of £245,000 has been made to Drumgath GAC for its sports pavilion. An allocation of £73,500 out of a total project investment of £245,000 has been made to Clonduff GAC for its sports pitch and lights. An allocation of £66,000 out of a total project investment of £220,000 has been made to An Ríocht GAC for its sports pitch. Furthermore, £250,000 out of a total project investment of £5.158 million has been made to Tollymore Mountain Centre for the rebuild of the mountain centre.

Funding for libraries included the allocation of £350,000 out of a total project investment of £1.1 million for a newbuild at Kilkeel library.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. I certainly welcome the level of spending in my constituency. I know that Mr McCausland,

since becoming the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, has been out and about and fact-finding in South Down, which I welcome.

Is the Minister aware of the delays that are associated with the development proposals for Bryansford GAC? If not, will he undertake to liaise with his Executive colleague Mr Poots to bring forward the project?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am glad that Mr Bradley noted that I have been in South Down. He very kindly provided me with a tour of the Ross monument in Rostrevor, for which I am grateful.

I can deal only with the funding side of the issue that he raised about the Gaelic football club in Bryansford. I am not familiar with the issue, but I will endeavour to look into it and come back to the Member about the matter.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Why did the Minister's Department send back £2.5 million in reduced capital requirements in the February monitoring round when projects in South Down and other constituencies that involve grass-roots, community-based sports clubs were ready to spend that money? Could that money not have been re-profiled? How did the Minister magically find £5 million yesterday for the Ulster-Scots broadcasting matter?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will deal with the last point first. Obviously, Mr McElduff did not bother to listen properly to the news because that money for broadcasting, since it is a reserved matter, is dealt with by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in London. It does not come out of my Department, nor does the money for the Irish-language broadcast fund. All the money for broadcasting comes from the Treasury through DCMS to Northern Ireland Screen, so we will set aside that matter.

The Member quoted a figure of £2.5 million being returned in the current monitoring round. That figure seems to have been quoted quite widely in the media in the context of an event that was organised by Sport Northern Ireland the other day in the Wellington Park Hotel.

I will give an example of why such money is returned. Last year, there was an underspend of £722,000, which was part of a £1 million fund for motorsport safety. That sort of situation is totally unacceptable, and I have asked officials to look into that as an example and as a matter

of urgency. Most of my Department's budget is given to arm's-length bodies. If such bodies cannot deliver with the money that they have, there is a clear problem that I am determined to have addressed.

To take motorsport safety as an example: I have a letter from coroner John Leckey that makes for serious reading. He states, and we agree, that safety is an important issue, but it is the responsibility of a sport's governing body. However, when almost £750,000 remains unspent, we must have answers. That is an intolerable situation that I am not prepared to permit to continue, and I am sure that the public will not appreciate or tolerate it much either. Therefore, questions will be asked about why some arm's-length bodies have not managed to spend the money that was given to them by my Department. If they had spent it, we would not be in the position of having an amount of money — £2.5 million in this case — returned in the current monitoring round. I am sure that the Member will accept that I am determined to deal with that issue.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister provide a brief written summary of projects that are planned by his Department for my Newry and Armagh constituency, which borders South Down?
[Laughter.]

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: All politics is parochial. I have the greatest pleasure in assuring the Member that I will provide the information that he requested.

Kennedy Kane McArthur

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department has any plans to mark the anniversary of the centenary of Kennedy Kane McArthur's victory in the 1912 Olympic marathon event. (AQO 765/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware of the Member's enthusiasm for the celebration of the centenary of Kennedy Kane McArthur's victory in the 1912 Olympic marathon. He has urged Lord Coe to give official recognition to the achievements of Kennedy Kane McArthur as part of the 2012 London Olympics, and all credit to the Member for his determination. He and I met representatives of Dervock and District Community Association and I conveyed my support for its plans to celebrate Kennedy Kane McArthur's Olympic victory.

To that end, I asked my officials to provide ongoing advice and support to the Dervock and District Community Association on how to become involved with the London 2012 games, to identify avenues for potential grant assistance and to identify potential partners for delivery of its intention to mark the centenary of the Olympic victory. That help has been provided, and, at the stage when the organisers can realise their plans, my Department will provide further support to help them to raise the event's profile and link it to the London 2012 games.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his interest in the issue. Northern Ireland must honour such events as the centenary of Kennedy Kane McArthur's win, particularly as it comes up when the Olympic Games will be held in London in our nation. Has the Minister any further suggestions about steps that the Dervock and District Community Association could take to realise its plans to mark the centenary of an achievement by one of our country's key and important historical figures?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

It is worth noting that Ulster has many black holes in its history — events that get forgotten. That is certainly true in the realm of sport. Therefore, I am pleased that the folk in Dervock and the Member are committed to marking the important centenary. Such events and individuals can be inspirational to today's young athletes. They create good role models.

As my officials outlined, the organisers should focus their first efforts on partnerships to create a small celebratory exhibition, for which they could apply for a London 2012 Inspire Mark. They could also participate in London 2012's open weekend, which runs from 23 July to 25 July 2010. Organisers could focus their efforts on producing the documentation that is necessary to apply to the events unit for a grant to fund their half marathon. The award of a London 2012 Inspire Mark would provide the official recognition of Kennedy Kane McArthur that the Member sought from Lord Coe during his recent visit.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail the criteria by which the Department assesses or selects past sports achievers? How are those criteria applied across the board?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The campaign is not a departmental initiative.

It arose in the community, with the Member's political support. Therefore, it is not a question of setting criteria. The Member and folk in Dervock came forward with a remarkable and impressive story. As well as being inspirational, McArthur was a very colourful character and a remarkable individual. When identifying key figures, others might follow his example.

When we met London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) representatives, I said that we were keen to see efforts being devoted to looking at Northern Ireland's sporting history and, perhaps, to creating an Ulster sporting hall of fame, because I am sure that other people who reached a world standard have been forgotten, so it would be good to remember them. I have tasked officials with that work, and, in due course, I will come back to the House on it.

Mr McDevitt: It is fitting that we remember K K McArthur and other great Irish runners and Olympians, such as Pat O'Callaghan and Bob Tisdall. In the light of London 2012, what plans does the Minister have for, and how much money does he intend to put aside to ensure that we get, elite training facilities for the region? Furthermore, is he in discussions with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland about promoting the potential of athletes who plan to compete in London, be it in an Irish or a Team GB shirt?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member asked first about elite facilities. Work is ongoing to assess a range of sports bodies' proposals for elite facilities. Recently, I received a paper that gives an indication of the thinking on the current assessment round. Proposals that get through that sift will then require an outline business case, which will take up more time and effort, so the timescale is uncertain. It is easy to erect a facility, but its sustainability is a key consideration. We can all identify sporting facilities, buildings and leisure centres that were provided in the past that may not be fit for purpose now or are proving to be very difficult to sustain. The elite facilities for which there were applications are wide and varied. Some proposals give every indication of stacking up financially and being sustainable, and others may not. It is important that we get the assessment process right, because such projects are not put up simply for the next six months or a year. Their ongoing running costs, from the Exchequer or wherever, is the major

issue. Therefore, we would be unwise and foolish to move ahead with them pre-emptively.

The Member will also be aware that there was a difficulty with two applications, resulting in legal proceedings and challenges. Those cases are still being dealt with, which has delayed matters. The delay is not down to anyone in the Department; the matter was outside our control, and it is still to be fully resolved. However, those cases have been set aside to enable us to proceed with the other applications. That is why we are where we are. We decided to park those cases until they are fully resolved and to move ahead with the others. It would be inappropriate to let those cases hold the others back any further.

I cannot remember the Member's other question. However, if he gets one question answered, he is doing rightly.

Sport: Adult Participation

3. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any research being undertaken by Sport NI into the levels of adult participation in sport and physical activity. (AQO 766/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is undertaking a large-scale survey into levels of adult participation in sport and physical activity. The survey is being carried out as part of the delivery of 'Sports Matters: the Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019'.

The aim of the survey is to enable comprehensive estimates to be made as to the amount of sport and physical activity that adults in Northern Ireland undertake and how frequently and intensively they do so. As part of the survey, Sport NI will also be gathering information on a range of related issues, including levels of participation among different groups of adults, motivations for participation, reasons for non-participation, club membership, volunteering and coaching. It is expected that the findings will be available in October.

3.15 pm

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given that the Minister's Department has announced that sport will be a major loser in the Department's revised budget expenditure, will the Minister ensure that the specific Programme for

Government target for a strategy for sport relating to significantly increasing adult participation in physical activity will not be affected by those cuts? I am particularly concerned, as I am sure the Minister is also, about the impact that the cuts would have on areas of social deprivation.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Quite a bit has been said over the past few days about cuts in funding for sport for the incoming year. Therefore, it will be helpful if I set the record straight on that. Prior to the recent announcement of my Department's proposed budget for 2010-11, Sport NI's indicative budget, and I emphasise the word "indicative" — it is purely an indication — for that year was £13 million for resource and £20.8 million for capital. The indicative budget now provides Sport NI with £11 million for resource and £20.3 million for capital. Despite the reduction from the previous indicative budget, that still gives Sport NI an uplift or increase of £2 million in its resource budget compared to the current year. That represents an increase in expenditure for the next year of 23%.

Some people seem to manage, and I do not know how they do it, because they are certainly not using the arithmetic that I learned at school, to turn an increase of 23% into a reduction or a cut, which seems quite remarkable. There is also a £7 million increase in the capital budget above that originally indicated in the comprehensive spending review for 2008-2011. I emphasise that there has been a 23% increase in the resource budget, because I looked at some of the press statements over the past few days from various interviews, and people have been saying that the proposals would mean that 120 local clubs would face the prospect of no funding at all, 50 or more top athletes would not get any financial help, jobs would go, 24 community sports posts would be under threat, including one in the Member's constituency, and a further five jobs would be lost in schools. However, if there is a 23% increase next year and an uplift and increase of £2 million, I cannot understand why there should be any reductions or job losses at all. It is not as big an increase as we wanted or hoped for, and it is not as big an increase as we anticipated, but it is still an increase.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister considered developing any adult-focused sports programme

geared at addressing health defects in the adult population as a result of physical inactivity?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

This brings me to the issue of our strategy, which is called Sport Matters. I must point out to the Member that it was approved by the Northern Ireland Executive in December 2009. The strategy looks at how we make sport more effective, how we ensure that there is a cross-departmental approach to it and how we ensure that it is used in addressing issues of health and obesity, which is the sort of thing that the Member was speaking about. The Executive eventually approved the document in December 2009. I hope to publish it in the near future, and I am considering the next steps in taking forward its implementation. To that end, I have written to the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, asking them to nominate a senior official from each Department to join a Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL)-led Sport Matters monitoring group.

It is my intention to chair that monitoring group, which will be expected to oversee the delivery of Sport Matters.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister, quite rightly, mentioned the cross-departmental nature of sporting issues. Accepting that participation in exercise starts during childhood and school years, and, hopefully, continues throughout adult life, what conversations, if any, has he had with the Minister of Education with regard to the ongoing delay of the publication of the sport strategy for schools?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The Member is right to identify the fact that although we were able to proceed on many sporting issues that are solely the preserve of one Department, namely DCAL — we could move ahead on all of those — the fact that Sport Matters was held up for so long affected our ability to get interdepartmental co-operation. That point was not made specifically to the Education Minister, but it was made in a general way on quite a number of occasions. I hope that now that we have reached the point at which it has been approved and is about to be published, we will move quickly towards having the monitoring group in place and will see the results of that in the near future.

Mr G Robinson: Has DCAL or Sport Northern Ireland carried out any other surveys on participation in sport and physical activity by, for example, women, older people, people with disabilities and children?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

DCAL annually runs a module in the continuous household survey, which measures the number of adults who have participated in sport during the previous 12 months. The results are published annually on the DCAL website. Continuous household survey data is available on a wide range of different groups of adults, which includes men, women, older people, people who suffer social or economic deprivation and people with disabilities.

DCAL also ran a module on sport participation in the 2007 young persons' behaviour and attitudes survey, which was aimed at those aged between 12 and 16 years. We will repeat that module in the 2010 survey. Those results are also published on the DCAL website. In 2009, DCAL carried out research on the impact of the economic downturn on participation and attendance. That publication, which contains the findings from the May 2009 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency omnibus survey, reports on the impact of the economic downturn on participation in, and attendance at, cultural and leisure activities and events.

Sport Northern Ireland's existing large-scale adult sport and physical activity survey already looks at a wide range of different groups of adults, which includes men and women, older people, people who suffer social or economic deprivation and people with disabilities. Sport Northern Ireland also plans to undertake further surveys on participation by children and young people as part of its broader research strategy.

Libraries NI

4. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what new initiatives and services Libraries Northern Ireland has been able to offer since separation from the education and library boards. (AQO 767/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Libraries Northern Ireland assumed responsibility for the public library service on 1 April 2009. Much of its work during its initial year of operation has focused on strategic issues, such as completing the transfer of responsibilities to

Libraries NI and putting in place a framework for effective and efficient delivery of library services; harmonising policies and practices from the five education and library boards to ensure a single coherent service; developing, through public consultation, the future strategic direction of library services for Northern Ireland; and delivering the efficiencies that were projected in the review of public administration by reducing administration costs by £600,000.

Even during its relatively short period of existence, a noticeable improvement to the delivery of library services is evident. For example, Libraries NI has invested more in the library estate in one year than was invested in any previous year. New libraries have opened in Newtownstewart and Antrim. Work on a number of other projects is under way. Libraries NI has increased expenditure in library stock. It is on track to invest £2 per person on stock, which is an increase of more than £1 million from the previous year. It has started a £1 million project called Health in Mind to improve access to information on mental health and well-being.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his reply. What funding has been made available to the Library Service to enhance community participation and training for the elderly in the use of computers?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I have been looking carefully at the draft allocation of Libraries NI's budget for 2010-11, and we are still looking at that budget. The Member identified certain areas that he sees as priorities, and they are worthwhile initiatives. I will keep those in mind as we look at how Libraries NI sets out its budget for the incoming year. It will put its budget and business plan for the year in front of me, and, at that stage, I will bear in mind the Member's suggestions.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the positive contribution that libraries and libraries provision can make to those in our communities who are socially and economically disadvantaged, will the Minister assure us that libraries that are in areas of social need will be kept open following the current review?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A strategic review is being undertaken, particularly on the Belfast estate. I assume that the Member is referring to that area. The board of Libraries NI is carrying out a public consultation on a

strategic review of the library service in the greater Belfast area. The Libraries NI board agreed unanimously to carry out that consultation. The Libraries NI board includes elected councillors from the Member's party, the SDLP, my party and the Ulster Unionist Party. No final decisions have been made, and I encourage anyone with an interest in the Belfast public library service to participate in the consultation. The consultation process has been extended until 5 April 2010 to give communities that are concerned about developments or who have suggestions for improvements a good opportunity to input fully into the process.

Libraries NI has undertaken that review to improve services. It is not about saving money; it is about providing a better service. Any savings that are made in the review will allow better allocation of existing resources in library stock, longer opening hours, other library services and more outreach services.

One example of good practice is the Grove Wellbeing Centre in north Belfast. That centre is in an area that is recognised as being socially disadvantaged. In that community, the new provision has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of people who are registering as library users and in the number of books that are being borrowed. The important factor relates not so much to buildings as to getting people to use libraries. The more that libraries are used and the more people who read and borrow books, the better it will be for that community, for literacy and for the social benefits that flow from library usage. I am sure that the Member will agree that increased usage has to be a priority. In recent years, there has been a steady decline in the use of libraries, not only in the city but across the United Kingdom. We want to see that situation reversed, and the success of that is dependent on having better services that will attract people.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire faoi leabharlanna Thuaisceart Éireann agus faoi chúrsaí oidhreachta.

The Minister will be aware that the legislation that set up Libraries Northern Ireland has a heritage brief for Libraries Northern Ireland. Will the Minister explain why Libraries Northern Ireland has delayed in acting upon the heritage brief, especially when specialist libraries, such as the Irish and Local Studies Library in

Armagh, are uncertain about their future? Will the Minister assure me that the heritage brief of Libraries Northern Ireland will be presented to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure without further delay?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, you may answer any or all of those questions.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member will be aware that I was a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure when the Libraries Bill was going through the Assembly and the Committee. He will also recognise that I was one of the Committee members who pressed most strongly for heavy emphasis to be placed on cultural heritage, particularly that of Northern Ireland. I have spoken to the chief librarian and to others, including the chairperson of Libraries NI, about the matter. They are conscious of the issue.

They recognise the important role of libraries in relation to cultural heritage. We should bear in mind that the organisation was established only on 1 April 2009, but it is considering the matter and treating it seriously.

I have no doubt that if the Committee were to contact Libraries NI, it would be more than happy to come to make a presentation. It is a valuable area of work because it helps to build a sense of social cohesion and a shared and better future. Libraries can play an important role in that. I am sure that the Member will support me in emphasising that point to Libraries NI, because it is fully committed to the matter.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 8/09] be agreed. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not wish to speak at any great length on the motion. Other Members have demonstrated an impressive capacity to do so, but I do not share the assumption that sufficient anoraks exist in society to follow such extensive outpourings.

The context in which we are discussing the Budget Bill has already been set out, and it has been largely uncontested during the debate. The consequences of global economic downturns, the range of reliefs on rates on water, the inability to dispose of surplus land assets because of market conditions and the imposition of efficiency costs by Westminster are obvious to all Members. However, should the Assembly simply manage the impact of the changed economic circumstances or should we respond with confidence, imagination and innovation?

In Jonathan Bell's contribution, he effectively set out how Departments are utilising the funds available to them to invest in quality services, and so forth. However, the financial reach of Executive resources is clearly finite. Nevertheless, there is the ability to continue to address the agreed Programme for Government targets, although people would not know that from the local media as there appears to be a general commitment to engender a sense of failure and pessimism. When I hear some of those comments, I am reminded of David Irvine's words in the Chamber when he said that many people in society were clairvoyant and could see the future, and it was all bad. He was mainly referring to the unionist community, although it struck a chord across the board. However, I do not agree.

I welcome the Departments' disposition in delivering on their briefs within the Budget constraints and the available resources as a first step in defending what is happening here and explaining it in greater detail. That is

why I am bemused by today's criticism of the proposal to explain to people the details of the Hillsborough agreement. We should not be afraid to inform people, and we should not be afraid of informed debate.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member accept that it would have been a good idea to have had all parties involved in the Hillsborough agreement and not just two of them?

Mr McLaughlin: I am quite certain that all the parties were at Hillsborough. I am also quite certain that a range of discussions and topics were processed and that all parties were involved. I do not argue that the procedures that we are devising in the developing political process are perfect, and I accept that they can be improved. I accept that if there is angst or resentment that the processes are not sufficiently inclusive, that should be addressed. I also accept that efforts to resolve difficult issues require concentrated focus, which perhaps narrows down the range of participation. However, I absolutely accept the general principle that the Member addresses. We should continue to address the challenges and deficiencies.

There were some interesting responses from across the Chamber when Jennifer McCann introduced the issue of the Barnett formula, and I found myself almost responding to those responses in the same knee-jerk fashion. To argue that it is dangerous to review the Barnett formula at the current time is only one perspective on what is a challenge for the Assembly as a whole. The reality is that Barnett is already being reviewed by the Treasury and Whitehall, and they have set the terms of reference for that review. Are we expected to sit back and accept its outcome, or can we engage with it, perhaps to our advantage, if only to debunk some of the misapprehensions?

I have been at close quarters to the Treasury. I was part of an all-party delegation that sat across the table from Treasury officials whose basic starting point was that they were giving too much financial assistance to this region. To leave those officials with that impression would be a strategic mistake. All parties must engage with the Treasury to demonstrate that we have confidence, imagination and valid opinions about what would work in this region and what is important.

The real question is whether people in this region, and the Chamber, begin with a view that

the Barnett formula is fair to the North, and I suspect that many feel that it is not. Most of the MLAs who have engaged in the discussion around the Barnett formula have acknowledged that Departments are struggling with the reality of budget deficits, just as they were struggling in the more benign economic circumstances in 2008, before the restoration of devolution. We had a very ambitious Programme for Government, and, before that, we had a broader range of issues that Members and parties wanted to address.

Those issues were narrowed down, refined and tailored to suit the available resources during the budgetary discussions, but that does not mean that we reached a consensus that we had sufficient resources to begin with. As I have said before in the Chamber, we had to cut our coats to suit the cloth that was available. Whether we continue with that unequal struggle or examine ways of supplementing the block grant or available revenues to address the range of services to which our people are entitled is a question that can become a unifying influence in an Assembly that has seen many examples of discord and a lack of co-ordination.

In the budgetary discussion during the preparation for Government process, a consensus emerged among Members that the Barnett formula was intrinsically flawed. If we are afraid to admit that now, in the aftermath of devolution, what do Members think the attitude of the Treasury will be to such a lack of self-confidence and demonstration of dependency? Do they believe that the Treasury will be impelled to greater generosity? I suspect not; rather it will see this region, the Executive and the parties in it as a soft touch. We must address that by being more forthright in exercising our challenge function and in expressing our view that the Barnett allocation is insufficient to provide the quality of service that is available in other regions in the Whitehall domain.

Today's proposals by the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group in relation to corporation tax are interesting, because they also highlight the issue of consensus. There is a consensus among all Members of the all-party delegation that met Gordon Brown and his Treasury advisers that a corporation tax adjustment is necessary here.

That consensus was an important and encouraging development. It was not a starting

point for my party, but it was recognition across the board that we had to engage with Gordon Brown and his advisers to demonstrate our ability to agree on what we felt was required to help with the number one priority of rebuilding the economy.

The ability of all parties to address an important platform issue on which they would all agree, and that they would all agree to prosecute, was an important example that we should carry forward. The fact that Gordon Brown and his advisers deflected, and, indeed, rejected, that approach is neither surprising nor as strategically relevant as the fact that the Assembly has given every indication since then of having thrown in the towel on the issue. That has been a huge mistake.

The threat to our economic well-being is of sufficient importance to command new initiatives and a return to achieving all-party mandates. I am responding in part to the point made by Basil McCrea. We should tackle the present-day problems with the same approach that we took in the period immediately before the restoration of devolution.

It may be of some interest to the Minister if I suggest that there may be scope to develop an approach to the economy: perhaps a subcommittee with clear terms of reference that could draw on the experience of the Assembly parties and key stakeholders such as business, further and higher education, the social-economy sector, the community and voluntary sector and the trades union movement. The challenge is to respond rather than to manage.

Some Members referred to the Bain report, about which I will make some comments. There was also a reference to the very interesting concept of invest to save; it is interesting even in combination. The Minister referred to the spectacle of civil servants passing each other in cars, buses and trains on their way to work; that is not a valid response to the intrinsic value of local, subregional economies being allowed to develop and grow through a concentrated and committed policy of relocation or decentralisation.

Mr O'Loan, who is not in his place, referred to Workplace 2010, the collapse of which leaves the Executive with the challenge of addressing substandard — and, in some instances, below substandard — Civil Service accommodation. However, that setback should be turned into

a comeback. We should attempt to address the imperative requirement of addressing Civil Service accommodation through a process that allows us to open our minds to the possibility and benefits — cost and otherwise — of developing Civil Service accommodation in areas outside what might be regarded as the centre of government or the clusters around the centre of government.

This is a small region, and it is perfectly within our capacity, and in the spirit of value for money and invest to save, to look beyond east and south Belfast as options for the location of government offices. It also makes environmental common sense, as it would lead to reduced travel times and less motorised transportation on our roads.

Jennifer McCann drew attention to the equality issue, particularly in relation to gender, and I support the points that she made. I have had discussions with senior civil servants who had to decline opportunities for advancement because it would have meant separation from their families and relocating to offices in Belfast. That was an injustice to them, and it has done a disservice to us, because those were capable civil servants with enormous potential and experience, but because of the glass ceiling, they were, in effect, discriminated against.

The onus remains on the Assembly to demonstrate that we can deal not with the consequences of our own failure but with the failure that developed over many decades and that will not be resolved overnight. Unquestionably, a pattern of discrimination emerged that has resulted in long-standing patterns of regional disparity and some hot spots of social and economic disadvantage that are difficult to resolve. We have to start somewhere if we are to resolve that in the long term, and an opportunity exists through the way in which the Executive distribute the benefits and advantages that flow from relocation and having government go into those areas to provide opportunity and important impetus to the subregional economy.

3.45 pm

My main thesis is that the political and economic crisis must be responded to. All elected representatives should work in collaboration and agreement with one other on the delivery of robust and sustainable government. Our realistic and pragmatic approach to the Budget should not be the only demonstration of our

ability to manage our own affairs. We must demonstrate that that we are looking not only at new ways of working with one other but at delivering quality, robust, sound and sustainable government.

Mr Ross: Some lengthy contributions have been made, particularly this morning, but my contribution will not be quite as lengthy — it certainly will not be as technical — as some of those speeches. A colleague said that the Members who speak earliest are often the anoraks, and I will make a point of not falling out with the wrong people in case I am appointed to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for the next year.

The Speaker was brave when he said that he would allow latitude in the debate for Members to speak on whatever issue they want, and David McNarry certainly took that opportunity. My colleague Jonathan Bell said that he contrasted the view of one side of the Ulster Unionist Party with the view of the other side of the Ulster Unionist Party. One view of David McNarry could also be contrasted with the other view of David McNarry. He talked about trying to be friends with, and about building better relations with, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, yet he came out with unsavoury, unparliamentary language to Members on the DUP Benches, both during and after his speech. I hope that the Speaker will look at his comments.

Mr McNarry made many comments at the start of his speech about the Hillsborough agreement. I look forward to our having a debate on that issue in the House. Today is not the time to do that, so I will not go on to use this occasion to discuss it, but I look forward to having a real debate in the Assembly on the Agreement at Hillsborough Castle in the coming weeks. It was also strange that Mr McNarry seemed to take a negative attitude towards the fact that the Parades Commission will be abolished at the end of the year. I am not sure that too many members of the Loyal Orders throughout Northern Ireland will share either that view or his love of the Parades Commission.

Mr Bell: Is it not the case that the position of the Ulster Unionists and Conservatives, as expressed by Owen Paterson, the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, is that the Parades Commission should remain?

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention. In recent weeks, we have heard suggestions

that some members of the Ulster Unionist Party have been travelling across the country and suggesting likewise. That will be met with concern by members of the unionist community.

One positive point during Mr McNarry's speech was the intervention from my colleague the Member for East Antrim Sean Neeson. I hope that Hansard staff picked up on his witty retort, because it deserves to have been noted.

It is clear that today's economic circumstances are different from those that existed when the Budget and the investment strategy were drawn up. However, at that time, when devolution was returned, the Executive put growing the economy at the heart of the Budget. The economy is vital to the future of Northern Ireland. Declan O'Loan argued that the entire Budget and Programme for Government should be scrapped and started again.

Even if our opinions on how we should address those issues differ, the one thing that we can agree on is that the economy should still be very much at the centre of what the Executive and the Assembly do. In that sense, we got it absolutely right when we made the economy our number one priority.

These arguments are a bit old. We have had them before, and we will have them again. The Minister mentioned that the in-year monitoring process has been useful in allowing for adjustments and reallocation of finances to be made during the year to the tune of around £1 billion. In-year monitoring allows for flexibility, and it has been used to good effect over recent years.

Whenever we discuss issues such as this, it is important that we have mature debates. With the exception of a few Members' contributions, today's debate has, by and large, been just that. In the early days of devolution — the party that I am mostly talking about is not actually represented here at the moment — countless motions were tabled that called for the Executive to bring forward one priority or another. Had those sorts of motions been agreed to, the entire block budget would have been spent within a fortnight of devolution returning. It is important that we take these debates seriously, that we recognise that we do not have bottomless pits of money to throw around the place and that we need to treat the issues in question with a level of maturity.

Previous Budget debates over the years have been renowned for Members standing up

and reeling off a list of pet projects in their constituencies. Again, Members have shown a level of maturity today by not doing that. Given that the Minister and I both represent East Antrim, he will be well aware of anything that is on my list. One of the constituency issues that I raised during our first Budget debate was the A8 road. I am pleased that progress has now been made on that issue and that commuters will have safer journeys and quicker travel times between Belfast and Larne. That is good not only for the East Antrim constituency but for the whole of Northern Ireland. That is positive. I noted that the Minister said yesterday that the new road means that he will be able to have a few extra minutes in bed in the mornings. Given his lack of sleep during the Hillsborough negotiations, he probably deserves that more than the rest of us.

There are many things that we would want to do if we had bottomless pits of money. We could scrap student fees or extend free public transport, but to talk about doing that would be to engage in fantasy politics. As I said, today's debate has been more mature, because Members realise that we cannot allow for such luxuries in the current economic climate. The reality is that finances are tight. Over recent years, the Executive have committed vast sums of money to certain projects. The Civil Service equal pay claim and the continued deferral of water charges, which were perhaps mentioned more today than yesterday, are massive commitments for the public purse. I listened to some Members today and yesterday say that we should consider changing our view on water rates. Given the tough economic circumstances that people in Northern Ireland face, I think that the Executive made the right decision in deferring water charges. Many people have lost their jobs, and, consequently, their finances are tighter than ever. It is not the right time for the Executive to ask householders to pay water charges. Therefore, the Executive's decision was the right one. There was also a huge investment of around £22.3 million in the Bombardier CSeries project to secure the economy and safeguard jobs. That showed that this part of the world can deliver such projects. Again, such investments are very important.

My colleague Jonathan Bell talked about the decision that was taken at the beginning of this mandate to freeze the regional rate and about the effect that that had on small businesses in his Strangford constituency. He will be aware

that businesses across the Province are still operating today because of such decisions. It is important that we highlight some of the positive things that have come from the Assembly. Although some members of the media are always negative about what the Assembly has achieved, I think that we can quite rightly be proud of the achievements that I mentioned.

I wish to address briefly some of the challenges that various Departments face. I will focus primarily on those Departments on whose Statutory Committees I sit. I know that the various Chairpersons who spoke yesterday discussed much of this, but I wish to examine briefly some of the issues that face the scrutiny Committees on which I sit.

The Education Department is clearly one of the biggest spenders in the Assembly. For the future of the economy, it is vital that children have the best possible start in life. Therefore, it is important that we ensure that the money going to that Department is spent wisely. Members across the House are genuinely concerned that that money is perhaps not being spent as wisely as it should be.

Budget constraints have led to some uncertainty for those schools that were hoping for new buildings this year or next year. In my constituency, schools in Islandmagee and Larne were looking forward to newbuilds, but that is now very uncertain. When officials came to the Education Committee, as other members of the Committee will know, they ruled out newbuilds totally, saying that no new schools would be built this year or next year. However, when the Minister came to the Committee, she publicly contradicted her officials and said that that decision had not yet been made.

Mr Weir: I see from the budget figure on the capital programme for schools that the level of spend is going down by roughly 10%. Clearly, that will have an implication on capital spend. However, the lack of information emanating from the Department of Education on the capital school building situation is deeply disturbing and very worrying for Members and for their constituencies. Only today, I was given the nebulous answer that the situation is being looked at. Does the Member agree that, in any form of capital build, there is a need for a level of certainty, and that the Department of Education's dragging its feet on indicating how

its budget on capital build will be allocated is deeply undermining confidence in the sector?

Mr Ross: Absolutely, and that is the point that I was making. There is uncertainty, and that is not helped by the fact that when the Minister does come to the Education Committee, she sings a different song to that of her officials. That is something that all Committee members have expressed concern about, and it is a deep concern for those schools expecting newbuilds this year or next year.

Earlier, I mentioned how, in these sorts of debates, it is always tempting for Members to raise their pet projects, but I will resist at this stage. We are aware that one of the Minister of Education's pet projects is Irish-medium education. There is a concern that perhaps she will divert funding towards that medium rather than towards other areas in which significantly more children are educated. For example, the need for funding for primary schools is a great concern, and I am sure that Members across the House will have been contacted by local primary schools that are very concerned that they are not getting the level of funding that they need. One of the biggest issues — it has certainly filled my mailbox in the past few months, and, I am sure, those of other Members — and one which has been looked at seriously by the Education Committee is that of special educational needs. That is a massive issue for the public, and one which must receive adequate funding. It is important that the money that the Education Minister gets is allocated to the right areas and to the areas in which it will make the biggest difference.

Another point that was raised today by my colleague from Strangford, and which was raised yesterday by the Alliance Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Lunn, is the concern around the attempt to withdraw funding from prep schools. The Education Minister will find that it is not quite as easy to do that as she hopes. It has not yet sunk in for the Minister that the changes made under the St Andrews Agreement mean that she cannot go off and make solo runs and that she needs Executive approval for cross-cutting and novel ideas. The Minister will find that more difficult to implement than she previously thought.

The ePIC issue, which has come up in the Environment Committee, has, over the past number of years, been quite a considerable

financial drain, with millions of pounds being spent on it. Members of the Environment Committee went to Scotland to see a similar project. We hope that our version will be more successful, because, on the day that we went over for a demonstration, the whole system crashed and did not work at all. However, projects such as that will, hopefully, be of benefit to constituents in the future.

We are all very aware that the number of major planning applications has fallen in recent years, which, again, impacts on the amount of resource coming back into the Department.

The Environment Committee is also looking at the challenges that local government reform will bring. There will be a debate on that issue in the House next week.

4.00 pm

I am also a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee. We hope that no additional resources will be needed in the next year for issues that that Committee deals with, because that would mean that we would have a lot more work to do and that more complaints had been made about the conduct of Assembly Members. There is a serious point on that issue, because, over the past number of years, quite a few frivolous complaints have been made against Members, and they eat up the time of the Interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards and cost a considerable amount of money that could be spent elsewhere.

The global downturn has had a local impact. When we talk about the global downturn and the global financial crisis, it is probably the local impact that hits us harder than anything. In my constituency, there were job losses at FG Wilson, which is a major employer not only in Larne but in the surrounding area. There were considerable job losses at Nortel in Monkstown, and the recent announcement by Avaya that more jobs may go is of deep concern to local representatives and to those who are employed there and their families.

We know that the Executive are limited in what they can do in such situations. It is not the role of a Government to create jobs; their role is to create an environment in which jobs can be created through investment, foreign or otherwise, and in which the circumstances are right for entrepreneurs to start businesses and create employment. In that role, the Enterprise

Minister and Invest NI should be congratulated on their efforts, particularly with regard to the situation in Monkstown. Last week or the week before, the MLAs for East Antrim were invited to a meeting with the Enterprise Minister, at which she explained the efforts that she has made to save some of those jobs.

The situation is very difficult. Members of the public do not always understand that and are often quick to blame the politicians, even when businesses are acting in bad faith. It is important that the Executive make every effort to save the jobs that are under threat, so that we do not have hundreds more people out of work in the Monkstown area.

One important action that the Executive can take in such situations is to ensure that investment continues to help those who have recently lost their job to help them to train and to get the skills that they require to find other work or that they will require when there is an upturn in the economy and more jobs are available. It is important that the Minister for Employment and Learning continues to fund those training projects, and I hope that he will. We heard about the vast number of young people in our community who are out of work. We should all be concerned about that. We want to see as many of those individuals as possible brought into training and, ultimately, employment.

Over the past number of days, we have heard how the global economic downturn has impacted on all Governments across Europe and the world, and we have had quite a debate about its impact on the Government in the Irish Republic. That does not seem to have put off some Members who have legitimate political aspirations to join the Irish Republic. The financial difficulties in which that country finds itself have not put off those Members from wanting to link our fortunes to those of that country in the future.

Over recent years, we have also had significant difficulties when looking at the assets that we own. Part of the Executive's Budget was based on revenue from asset sales, but, given the property crash and everything else in recent years, we are not getting as much revenue as we had anticipated. Again, that brings challenges and means that there are difficult decisions to take.

In recent weeks, I have heard some Members say — in the Canteen and elsewhere — that they would not like to be Sammy Wilson and to have to make a Budget in the current economic climate. Those Members miss the point: this is not just a difficult time for the Finance Minister; it is a difficult time for the whole Executive and the whole Assembly. The Budget has been agreed by the Executive, and all Members have a duty to make an input to help to find the right approach for Northern Ireland. It is also important that all Departments take some pain in finding the savings. We simply cannot pass on the responsibility to ratepayers; that is an irresponsible approach for government to take.

I am concerned when some Members talk about wanting the Assembly to have tax-raising powers, because politicians are not talking about lowering taxes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will give way in a second. Politicians are not talking about lowering taxes; they are talking about raising taxes. Every instinct in my body is to avoid government that simply increases the tax burden on people and raises taxes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Does the Member agree that it is the issue of tax-varying powers that has been raised during the debate? The British Treasury raises taxes at the moment anyway.

Mr Ross: Yes. However, if the Assembly obtains such powers, I very much doubt whether Members will want to reduce taxes for the general public. They will only want to increase them. I do not want to promote the sort of politics that just raises taxes for individuals before the Executive take the difficult decisions to find the efficiencies themselves. In recent months, we have debated tax-varying powers. If those powers came to the Assembly, that would impact on the money that we receive from the Treasury. The matter has been argued in detail in recent times.

Over the past couple of days, some Members have suggested that an all-Ireland approach is the solution to all financial difficulties. In fact, the same Members say that an all-Ireland approach may be the solution to global warming or to a range of other issues. I am not entirely sure that businesses in Newry and other border towns agree with that approach, because, in recent times, businesses in those areas have

benefited from the fact that the border exists rather than lost out because of it.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Does the Member agree that a joined-up approach on infrastructure already exists for investment north and south? Moreover, there is already a cross-border approach to stimulating innovation in research and development. Furthermore, does he agree that co-ordinated delivery of services in areas such as education and health would be more efficient, provide more value for money and, therefore, be beneficial to the economy?

Mr Ross: There is a difference between an all-Ireland economy and co-operation between the two jurisdictions in this part of the world. I will return to that issue in a moment.

Regardless of all those issues, we must recognise that there are tougher times ahead and that, irrespective of whether the Labour Party — unlikely as that is — or the Conservative Party provides the next Government in Westminster, there will be large cuts to the Budget and to the Northern Ireland Budget. That will raise challenges for us and will mean that we must find huge savings. That is a challenge for all of us.

The Member has just mentioned an all-Ireland economy, and the issue comes down to cross-border structures versus cross-border co-operation. The current Finance Minister has been working with his counterpart on issues such as the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA). In his previous role, as Environment Minister, he worked with his counterpart in the Irish Republic on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications. That highlights that the DUP is in favour of co-operation that is beneficial to both jurisdictions. However, we have some difficulty with the amount of wastage and bureaucracy in some existing cross-border structures.

Last year, I spoke during a debate in the House on the cross-border structures and bodies that were set up as part of the Belfast Agreement. Questions have been asked about whether all those structures and the bureaucracy that comes with them is entirely necessary to facilitate good and proper co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Government of the Irish Republic. During previous debates, the Finance Minister said that he will talk to his counterparts in the Irish Republic about important issues and that he has no difficulty

picking up the phone to talk to individuals or to organise meetings. That is a much better way to do things than to have the forced North/South structures, with all the money that is spent on them. *[Interruption.]*

I will give way to the Member now.

Dr McDonnell: Although I neither agree nor disagree with the Member about the bureaucracy in the cross-border bodies, given that they are relatively small, does he agree that there is bureaucracy, duplication and wastage in our local systems? Does he share my concern about that, or is he concerned just about the cross-border bodies?

Mr Ross: I share those concerns. Where efficiency savings are to be made, they should be made at every level. Certain Departments in Northern Ireland should also be making efficiency savings. However, when the Irish Government were seeking significant savings, the first place they looked was the North/South bodies. They identified that huge sums of money were being pumped into those bodies, and, having asked whether such spending was necessary, they determined that it was not. Nationalist Members in particular seem to be wedded to the North/South structures, so there is a challenge for them to see whether we can have relationships with the Irish Government other than those through the structures that are using up huge amounts of money and bureaucracy.

During questions for oral answer to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister yesterday, a Sinn Féin Member, I think, raised the issue of an all-island civic forum. The Civic Forum that we had in Northern Ireland provided no tangible benefit to the people, and huge sums of money were pumped into it for no benefit at all. I do not believe that it should come back, and I certainly do not believe that it should be expanded into an all-Ireland body, given that we are in difficult enough times.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel said yesterday that he did not want to sound like a populist. The Minister could be accused of many things, but being populist is not one of them. He said that there were savings to be found here, which goes back to Dr McDonnell's point: if efficiency savings are to be found in Northern Ireland, we should look here first. We can look at the Assembly itself, but I know that that approach has been criticised in some quarters

as a party political tactic that would work to the advantage of the Democratic Unionist Party. Since 1998, when this place was established, we have been saying that there are too many Members in the Assembly and too many Departments and that we want to reduce the numbers of both. Other parties are hearing that message and can see that there are savings to be made in that area. It is not just a question of financial savings; there is the added benefit of such a reduction resulting in more efficient government by streamlined Departments. We should consider that, because we need to find efficiencies wherever we can.

Today and in previous debates, Members have focused on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety because of the massive efficiency savings that it is required to make. We know about the huge levels of bureaucracy and wastage in that Department. For example, even last year in a response to a question for oral answer, the Assembly was told about how much money was wasted on simple things such as missed appointments. If steps can be taken to reduce the number of appointments that are lost through people not turning up or forgetting about them, we should take them.

More recently, the swine flu issue caused huge financial pressures, and through Assembly questions we have determined that some 60% of the vaccines that were bought to combat swine flu have not been used and are sitting on the shelf. Questions must be asked about how much money the Minister spent on those vaccines and whether the information on which he based his decisions was entirely accurate, given that, at the time, a number of experts warned him against such measures. The fact that 60% of the vaccines have not been used and the threat of swine flu was not as bad as some people had determined should be an issue of concern. The Minister refused to answer my Assembly questions about the money that was spent on the swine flu episode, but that is probably more to do with the protection of the pharmaceutical companies, who have benefited most. We have had debates about the need for that Department to make efficiency savings, and Mr Farry highlighted the lack of movement by the Health Minister and his Department.

Efficiency savings need to be made across the board, and, although this debate gives Members an opportunity to say what they want

money to be spent on, it is an occasion for us to be serious about finding ways to find greater efficiencies by examining the use of our Budget to ensure that people get value for money. Ultimately, it is the people whom we represent who will get the benefit of the Budget.

4.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: I approached the Speaker at 2.00 pm today to enquire as to whether there would be a problem with my speaking to 'Stormont Live' at 2.30 pm. I need not have worried, because Mr Ross had yet to speak. For a man who started his diatribe by saying that he would not take long, to reach half an hour is something of a record. Mr Ross had much to say, but little of it was of any substance.

Important things need to be said on the Budget. There have been interesting contributions from Members that warrant discussion. One of the key points that Dr Farry made was on the need to take tough decisions. I am disappointed that he is not in the Chamber, although I understand why. He used the phrase "political kamikaze". I ask Mr Bell, who is of course leaving the Chamber, whether he would support job cuts or wage freezes. What action would he take to meet the inevitable reduction in public finances to which Mr Ross referred? The simple fact is that discussions will have to happen among parties. There are tough issues for us to struggle with. There is much discussion in the Chamber about a shared future but relatively little discussion about shared responsibility.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel states that this is an Executive Budget and that no party can disagree with it. It may surprise people to learn that none of the four parties in the Executive, as well as the fifth party that is trying its damndest to get into it, can say that it does not agree with the Budget. I agree with the Minister on that. Therefore, I wonder why we spend so long debating the issues. It comes back to the way in which modern politics has evolved, where, true to form, Mr Bell and Mr Ross claim the credit for everything that has happened, whether they were personally responsible or not. However, where blame is to be laid, it is to be laid anywhere but at their feet. It is no wonder then that the people of Northern Ireland look at their political class in dismay. They can no longer trust what is said, because it is all PR spin. It is all about how a situation is managed. I find that disgraceful.

I am prepared, as a Member of this Assembly, to engage in generous and genuine discussion. I am disappointed that Mitchel McLaughlin has left the Chamber. Perhaps his colleagues will relay to him that I noted the generosity of his comments, and I heard him say that, if there are issues of inclusivity to be addressed, we should address them. The Ulster Unionist Party has made no secret of the fact that it does not feel part of the Executive and that the Executive do not take notice of what we have to say. The logical conclusion of what I said about supporting the Minister of Finance —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Of course.

Mr F McCann: The Member says that the Executive do not listen. Does he include his party's member on the Executive in what he says, or is he excluded from criticism?

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention, because —

Mr D Bradley: Two members.

Mr B McCrea: Yes, we have two members on the Executive. As usual, I have got the SDLP to do the counting for me. That is tremendous.

I will respond to Mr McCann. The Assembly needs an opposition. If we cannot resolve our issues in an Executive, my contention is that we should have at least a two-party coalition run this place. If parties on the Executive do not accept our contribution, do not want our input and do not want inclusivity, the four-party coalition arrangement is nonsense, and there should be an opposition. Perhaps that answers the Member's question. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the fact that the Member comes to the House and sincerely tries and that he becomes exasperated when he is not listened to. However, does he not accept that the structures of the House are the result of what his party and his mathematician friends in the SDLP constructed —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Speaker started the debate by saying that he would allow a good deal of latitude. However, there is latitude, and then there is latitude. We have moved away from the Budget debate altogether. I ask the Member to return to the motion.

Mr B McCrea: In addressing the Budget, there is a question of political stability. Political stability is important for investment; nothing frightens off investment more than political instability. Discussions about potential unity between various parties are ongoing. There is an issue of whether we can agree on a set of principles, values and policies and find a common way forward. However, I hear Members saying, in effect, that their idea is right and that others are wrong. Unless we create some form of corporate governance that shares responsibility, we will be unable to take the tough decisions that need to be taken.

The need to raise taxes has been mentioned. Some Members, such as Mitchel McLaughlin, have said that we ought to do something about corporation tax. A simple answer might be to vary corporation tax or even reduce it to zero, but I do not know whether people would find that acceptable. However, £250 million would have to be taken off the block grant; Members can make up the difference as they see best.

Mr Hamilton: The Member makes the point that a reduction in corporation tax would result in a reduction in the block grant. Does he not accept that that does not mean that he has split the atom today? It was a key element of the Azores ruling of the European Court of Justice. There were three components to that ruling, one of which was that there must be a commensurate reduction in assistance to match the benefit of the reduction in corporation tax. The Member's suggestion is in no way new, novel or unique.

Mr B McCrea: I accept that the principle was outlined in the Azores ruling. My point is that every action has consequences. To have a proper debate on the issue, all eventualities must be taken into consideration.

People have asked what it will take for the people of Northern Ireland to become interested in politics. If the Assembly were to decide to raise taxes, that would certainly get people interested in politics and concentrate minds.

I am pleased to see Mr O'Loan back in the Chamber. He asked whether we should increase rates, bring in water rates and so on. Is he not aware of the pressure that many working and non-working people are under? The private sector is experiencing wage reductions, while the fundamentals in this place carry on unchallenged. Two thirds of our economy is based in the public sector, but no one challenges that

fact. No one gets to grips with that, because it would be political suicide to do so.

Mr O'Loan: I do not know whether I have understood the Member correctly. I am surprised that he seems to be saying that I called for an increase in rates. He either misheard me or is confusing me with a Member who sits closer to him in the Chamber than I do.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for that clarification. However, my question stems from what the Member said about Greece. What would happen if an attempt to take tougher action, as suggested by others in the euro zone, were to lead to civil unrest? If we were to exert similar pressure, how would he deal with any resulting unrest? Only by reaching agreement as an all-party coalition, which the Executive are supposed to be, can we take decisions to tackle the inequalities and inefficiencies in the system. It is not right for people to go into their baronial castles and lob missiles at other Ministers. Decisions have to be made.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am getting to the stage when I cannot take any more, but —

Ms Ní Chuilín: We are all probably getting to that stage, Basil. I am listening to what Basil McCrea is saying, particularly about the Executive. I thought, perhaps naively, that the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and, particularly, the Budget were founded on unanimous decisions by the Executive.

What Basil has not taken on board — it comes up in every debate on the Budget or the monitoring rounds — is that all Ministers and Departments take some pain. I have heard constituents talk about the immaturity of people in this place and their inability to agree, and I have no doubt that the Member's constituents say much the same. However, his party's Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is a prime example. That Minister's performance when dealing with budgets leads those constituents to think that we are not mature enough to agree, never mind deliver.

I do not expect Basil to agree with my next point, but I will make it nonetheless. I believe that Basil's comments are genuine. However, rather than lecturing the rest of us about maturity and good governance, he needs to have that conversation within his party. To me and

most other Members, good governance means agreeing a Budget. It also means recognising that, somewhere down the line, we will all have to experience some pain, although not necessarily through the loss of front line jobs. I do not agree with the Member's position on the public sector, particularly on health.

Basil needs a hug, because he is getting extremely exercised about the debate. All joking aside, however, time and time again we hear talk about good governance and the construction of the Executive; I find that a bit rich. The Member should have a chat with his party colleagues first.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that short, sharp intervention.

4.30 pm

Mr B McCrea: I am pleased to hear that at least some people are listening to what I say, rather than to what they think that I should be saying. I have not included certain issues in my speech today. Perhaps the Member thinks that I should mention the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety amongst others. I am clear that, when the lack of money creates problems, hard decisions will have to be taken. All Ministers must take collective responsibility, including the UUP's Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Minister for Employment and Learning. I do not know whether the Member misheard me, but I agree with her on that issue.

I would be interested to hear from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in his summation, whether the Minister of Education is happy with the cuts that have been put to her Department. Other Members spoke about the difficulties that we face. As I understand it — I am open to correction — we spent £250 million on capital expenditure last year.

This year, that was reduced to £170 million. I have been told that, because of the failure of the framework contracts and the inability to use the PPP, there is zero free money available for capital expenditure. I am told by the Department that that is what that means. There is only £30 million left for minor works against a backlog of £240 million. Our schools are falling apart. Perhaps the Minister of Finance and Personnel will clarify for me whether that situation is acceptable to the Minister of Education. Many people in schools are unhappy with that situation.

People talk to me about the revenue side of the Department of Education, but there is £100 million worth of cuts to be made: that is what we are facing. Given that 75% to 80% of the education budget is spent on labour, how can such cuts be made without imposing wage cuts or redundancies? Is this an Executive decision? Is it supported by the Minister? Both health and education are underfunded compared to their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom.

When it comes to an issue, if people unite and decide on the right way forward, then I will have to consider that. However, if a party cannot live with what is agreed in the Executive, there is only one place for it to be; namely, in opposition. I say that repeatedly. I am not an economist, but my opinion is that we will experience a series of years in which there will be cuts in available budgets, and very painful adjustments will have to be made. I think that it was the Finance Minister who asked whether we should keep on increasing the rates or taxes, or whether we should deal with inefficiencies and misallocation of funds. This is a trying time; but it is also an opportunity to get public finances sorted out for the next 30 to 40 years.

I long for a concerted effort to be made to deal with the structural inequalities in our system. We must find ways to balance the public and private sectors. It is not right that public sector jobs pay 25% more than commensurate jobs in the private sector. In addition, it cannot be right that wages of working people here are 80% of the wages of those in the rest of the country. On such issues, I want to see the introduction of an investment strategy that will maximise the added value that our economy can deliver. I do not mind whether it is in telecoms, IT or some other sector; but we, as a part of this world, must work out where to invest resources in order to maximise return, and that includes investment in infrastructure.

I want to say something concerning the Alliance Party. It may have been Mr Farry who talked about raising taxes. When it comes to that issue, I find it incredible that a party that is supposed to be trying to build consensus is being destructive when others are trying to mend fences. Members have to find some way of dealing with the issues that face us.

The Executive are responsible for the Budget, and as far as the UUP is concerned, they are dysfunctional. Our litmus test for the Executive

is the resolution of education issues, and I do not just mean the 11-plus: I mean the Budget; investment; jobs; the early years' strategy; funding for preparatory schools; and the changes in the common funding formula, which may see money being taken away from schools with sixth forms and given to others. All those issues must be dealt with on a collaborative and cohesive basis. If, and only if, the Executive can resolve the education issues, can we then have confidence that they are able to handle this Budget or any other powers that they want to obtain.

I know that Members feel that they have been waiting here for a long time. This has been a long debate, and they will ask for what purpose. Part of what I said was new and unscripted. The Members who chose to listen heard me talk about the way forward for the new political dispensation in this place. We will get nowhere without inclusiveness, equality and making sure that everybody is on board. Otherwise, we will only fiddle while Rome burns. The money will run out and all the people of Northern Ireland will suffer.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo faoi chúrsaí cáinaisnéise. Ba mhaith liom díriú go háirithe ar chúrsaí oideachais i mo óráid.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this Budget debate. As Mr O'Loan outlined our party position in some detail, I will direct my comments to the education budget, which was mentioned by several Members earlier in the debate. I am somewhat concerned about the state of the finances in the Department of Education. The capital resource was mentioned by a number of Members. We are told that due to pressures on the capital resource, there will be no newbuilds in 2010-11. In fact, the shortfall in the capital budget is £92 million.

Senior officials from the Department told the Committee on several occasions that there would be no newbuilds in 2010-11. The Minister then came to the Committee and told us that her officials do not speak for her. We, as Committee members, are trying to work out for whom they were speaking and whether we believe the Minister or the officials. There seems to be a degree of confusion between the Minister and her officials.

The Minister told us that, depending on the ongoing review, there may be some newbuilds next year. However, the Minister seems to be confused, and the message that goes out from the Department is one of confusion. Schools that were told that their projects would go on site in the spring of this year are confused. They now do not know whether that will happen. That is after a wait of eight or nine years in some cases and after review after review and economic appraisal after economic appraisal until the governors, teachers, parents and education providers are blue in the face, exasperated and frustrated.

The Minister very kindly wrote to the Education Committee on 14 January to obtain our views on how her Department can deliver savings and address pressures in the overall context of her priorities for education. It was very kind of the Minister to invite us to participate in the process. It is perhaps ironic that when the Minister had more money at her disposal, she did not invite us to participate in the process of spending that money, but when it came to making cuts, she was very generous and invited us to participate in the process. Unfortunately, however, some members may have viewed the Minister's invitation as an act of cynicism rather than kindness. Who could blame them? How can members of the Committee give their views on budgetary issues when they are not given the information that is needed to make informed decisions? The Minister may have asked us to make alternative proposals, but how can we do so when we have no sight of important information that is needed to make informed decisions?

Given the current capital difficulties, most people would find it difficult to foresee any newbuild in the coming year or, indeed, in years to come. Add the shortfall in capital resource of £92 million to the backlog in school maintenance of £270 million, and we have a recipe for a crumbling schools estate. That is hardly the facility or the accommodation needed to produce a twenty-first century education system.

The Department of Education's resource budget is not much better. Coincidentally, its shortfall is also £92 million, and there are no solid plans as to how that pressure will be met. The Minister's officials have outlined areas, including C2k, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the entitlement framework and the school improvement programme, in which total savings of around £30 million can be

made. The Committee has not been given any rationale on those savings. It has not been told what impact the savings would have on the projects concerned. Areas of supposed policy priority are being reduced: the entitlement framework by £5.5 million and school improvement by £7 million. We are being asked to support savings without any indication of their effects and without knowing whether the Minister agrees with the proposed savings.

For example, the entitlement framework is already well behind schedule, as indicated clearly in the 'Together Towards Entitlement' report. The Minister said that work needed to be accelerated to ensure that all schools are up to speed in delivering the entitlement framework, yet she is withdrawing resources from that very area. There is a contradiction in proposals from the Department; a tension between the savings being proposed and the policy areas being promoted.

We are told that a convergence plan will be enacted for education and library boards to produce further savings. That convergence plan has not yet been presented to the Committee. The privileged few who have had sight of it tell us that no figures have yet been set against the various proposals. If Members, including those on the Education Committee, are to assess the Department of Education's finances, we need the information that is required to do so. At present, the Department does not seem to be in a position to provide that information, which is an incredible position for any Department. I fear that, in the absence of achievable proposals being available to Members to scrutinise, we may end up with cuts that go right to the front line delivery of education services.

If the Minister wants our views, let her come forward with firm proposals and a clear rationale for them. Let us see the convergence plan for the education and library boards and the savings that will accrue from that process. At the moment, we are largely in the dark about the Department of Education's finances. The reason for that seems to be that the Minister is no better informed than we are. Perhaps, the Minister and her officials should sit down together to discuss and agree the Department's finances and come to the Committee with a unified message, one that contains the information that Members need to assess the proposals that the Minister is bringing forward. To date, that has not happened.

4.45 pm

Mr Brady: Will the Member enlighten us as to why he is calling for the restoration of the 11-plus?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his learned intervention, which has nothing to do with the debate. The SDLP is still opposed to academic selection. We have called for the CCEA test based on the primary-school curriculum to be introduced as an interim measure, as his party's own Minister proposed —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should return to the subject of the debate, namely the Budget Bill.

Mr D Bradley: I shall, of course, return to it. I was just taking the opportunity to enlighten Mr Brady on the SDLP's position on academic selection. However, I shall proceed to discuss the Budget Bill.

Last month, we debated proposals arising from the consultation on special educational needs and inclusion. The response to that consultation process was overwhelmingly opposed to the Minister of Education's proposals, yet, in her response to the debate, she insisted that she would proceed to spend £22 million to train teachers to implement proposals that are flawed, are opposed by almost every disability advocacy group in Northern Ireland and, as a result of the consultation, have not been agreed by her Department. In the present circumstances, perhaps that money would be better spent on ensuring that front line services are not impacted upon, teachers continue in their posts at the chalk face, classroom assistants continue to support teaching and learning at the chalk face, and the statutory rights of children with special educational needs are maintained. Here and now, I assure the Minister that my party will not support any Department of Education proposals that impact on front line education services.

What is needed? The Department must sort out confusion about its resources and let Members and members of the Education Committee know the true state of its finances. Schools, teachers and education partners have a right to know. Therefore, without any further delay, the Minister of Education should bring forward clear proposals.

Mr Hamilton: I am used to speaking initially in debates in my capacity as the Chairperson of

the Social Development Committee. My one regret as a result of holding that post is that it sometimes restrains me from saying what I want to say or espousing my party's position much more clearly. By its very nature, chairing a Committee forces one to try to reflect the views of everyone on the Committee, or at least the majority position, and I shall attempt to do that later, when we debate the Housing (Amendment) Bill.

Since being appointed Chairperson of the Committee, I have very much enjoyed my time on it. It would be impossible for any Member to serve on that Committee and not enjoy its cross-cutting impact on his or her constituency work. I have analysed my constituency work in the past year, and more than 40% of the day-to-day work that I do, or, rather, those in my constituency office do on my behalf, relates to social security and housing, which are the core responsibilities of the Department for Social Development. In addition, working in that post, I have quickly learned that there is a raft of policy implementation behind what Members see in their day-to-day constituency work.

I want to address what has undoubtedly been the number one issue for the Department for Social Development since the restoration of the Assembly: social housing. In the context of the Budget debate, we are talking primarily about the financing of social housing. In the past number of years, the phrase "social housing" has rarely been heard without being accompanied by the word "crisis". Often, that "social housing crisis", as it is referred to ad infinitum, is related to financing and the budget available for social housing, and, to break it down to a further subset, to the financing and budgeting for social housing newbuilds.

I want to address the issue and provide some thoughts for the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister for Social Development. People do not refer to social housing as being in a state of crisis without cause, and we only need to look at the Department for Social Development's figures to back up that claim. During 2001-02 and 2007-08, the social housing waiting list in Northern Ireland rose from 25,903 to 39,688. I do not intend to get into the reasons why it rose by that amount, but I think that we all appreciate why that was the case. Nevertheless, over that short period, the social housing waiting list rose by 53%. Through our constituency work, Members regularly have to deal with the impact of that on

individuals and families. However, what is not frequently said in connection with the issue is that over the same period, investment in social housing newbuilds in Northern Ireland increased from £65 million to £156 million — a 140% increase in investment versus a 53% increase in the number of individuals on the social housing waiting list.

The conclusion that I draw is that continuing to do more of the same, and purely investing at current levels, will not suffice. It will not cut the mustard, and it will not achieve anything. My rudimentary mathematics show that even if we were to double our current investment year on year — and we are achieving something like 1,750 starts in this financial year, which is the highest in ten years — it will take us 20 years to clear the current social housing waiting list. That is in the absolutely unlikely scenario that not one single person would be added to the social housing waiting list. This, therefore, is the extent of the problem that we have with the current budget. It is not that the budget is insignificant or insubstantial; it has been rising significantly in spite of the obvious pressures that have been placed on it.

Mr F McCann: I appreciate what the Member is saying, and there is always a good debate at the Social Development Committee when, as he says, one can get me to shut up from time to time. The Member mentioned 1,750 newbuilds, but that is a manipulation of the figures. When that figure is broken down, less than half of the newbuilds are actually built from the ground up. Two years ago, we talked about 1,500 newbuilds, but only about 700 were newbuilds; the rest were brought in from private developers. Therefore, when one looks at the figures, one is not seeing the truth.

The Minister said that she would put the construction industry back to work, but aspects of the industry say that more people are employed in the provision of maintenance, such as Egan contractors, and they will take the hit in the proposed cuts to the budget.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention. He made a couple of interesting points, which will lead into some points that I am going to make. His first point is right in that when the numbers are scrutinised they may not be what they appear to be at first glance: but, what is new about statistics and figures? I appreciate the Member's argument that there

are 1,500 newbuilds, and that maybe a lot of them were off-the-shelf. There are 1,750 this year, and some of them are also off-the-shelf.

I concur with his point that off-the-shelf purchasing does not always represent best value for money. It should, and I hope that any existing off-the-shelf purchasing does represent best value for money. One would expect that the unit price for newbuilds would be less than off-the-shelf purchases, particularly at present, with land prices, construction costs and the housing association grant having come down. That will not be the case in every instance. However, one would imagine that it would be so in the majority of cases.

There are almost 40,000 people on the social housing waiting list. Although the Member may disagree, my point is that, if someone has been on that waiting list, perhaps in a chronic state of homelessness — goodness only knows that person's background or circumstances — I would hazard a guess that it probably does not matter to that person whether the house that he or she moves into, which he or she has longed for, waited for and dreamed about for years, has been constructed by a housing association through traditional procurement routes, is an off-the-shelf purchase, or whatever.

I will comment on some other possible methods of social housing provision, which is vital to unlocking the problem of financing social housing in Northern Ireland. I will return to the point that I made initially: if Albert Einstein were here and saw the way in which the Assembly invested record levels in social housing newbuilds and how waiting lists have lengthened, he would be right to say that we are insane. If the Assembly continues in the way that it has been going for years, it will not achieve the step change in delivery of social housing. It must do things differently.

I want to put on record that I do not believe that the current model is sustainable in the long term, particularly in a climate in which there are severe pressures on public finances, especially on the capital side. Many Members have mentioned that, and I may address some of their points later. If the Assembly did not make the dent that it hoped to make on social housing waiting lists when it was pouring record levels of money into newbuilds, what will happen when times are tighter? It will make even less of an impact.

The Assembly can no longer subject social housing to the vagaries of the property market, whether that be land sales or house sales: that point has been made several times by Committee members and other Members of the House, and it seems to be commonly accepted. However, for many years, the Housing Executive did pretty well out of land and house sales, which more than covered investment in social housing, whether that was for newbuilds, maintenance or repairs.

Members must all accept, therefore, that, moving forward, we have to take the rough with the smooth. The financial realities of the downturn simply make different methods of delivering the same objective of social housing, through newbuilds or other methods, more important than ever. The largesse of the past 10 years will not be there to the same extent. There is now a greater imperative to consider different delivery methods than there was in the past when there was no incentive. When land and houses were being sold and more money was coming in than was going out, there was no incentive to consider different ways of delivery.

The Assembly must be smarter, more agile and think of different ways to achieve the same goals. It is about achieving the same goals that all Members share. That imperative exists because the Assembly will simply not achieve that objective if it continues as it is.

Earlier, I used the analogy of splitting the atom. It is not as though Members sit here in splendid isolation, have no ideas in their heads and no ideas are being put out by different people. It is not as though there is not best practice in the rest of the United Kingdom and even beyond about how the Assembly could deliver better and have more sustainable financing for social housing in the future.

The Commission on the Future for Housing in Northern Ireland, which is considering a vision for 2020 for housing in the round, has partly addressed the subject of more sustainable financing for social housing. It talks about a more strategic role for the Housing Executive, changing its landowner function and issues such as an asset management strategy and tax incremental financing. I could not answer many questions in detail on tax incremental financing: anybody who can deserves a prize.

It sounds interesting.

Mr Weir: Perhaps someone will intervene.

5.00 pm

Mr Hamilton: I will give way if anyone wants me to; I am happy to take a break at this stage.

There is a caveat to all the ideas that I mention. I am not saying that any of the ideas that I recall others telling me about, that people told us about in Committee meetings or, indeed, that we have not looked at or examined yet are the right answer for Northern Ireland. However, I hazard a guess that somewhere within all of them is something that we can take on board and adopt or adapt for Northern Ireland's circumstances. At least the housing commission is talking about different ways of getting more sustainable financing for all aspects of social housing. That is to be encouraged.

The housing commission is building on or working alongside work that has been achieved already by the Housing Council. Everybody, certainly those from a local government background, should be aware of what the Housing Council does. It is representative of all 26 councils, and I think that the five biggest parties of the Assembly are represented on it. It came up with a fairly courageous paper called 'Bridging the Gaps', which looked primarily at addressing the current funding problem that exists in social housing. It also tried to look to the future to make that more sustainable, and that is what I am talking about.

The Housing Council made several proposals on a cross-party basis. One of its ideas related to stock transfer. Under that proposal, housing stock that is currently in the ownership of the Housing Executive would be moved to a housing association. The Housing Council proposed that initiative particularly for dilapidated properties or houses that are in need of much investment to bring them up to the standard of decent homes. I think that there is a pilot under way in the Creggan in the Foyle constituency, and we await with interest the report and evaluation of that pilot. There is scope in certain circumstances for that to be used as a way forward. Let us transfer certain types of stock over to housing associations so that they can gain finance on the back of the asset, which would allow them to do the repair work, and then housing that has not been in use will be brought back into use. The proposal has a limited utility, but it has some usefulness.

The Housing Council also talked about leasing, and, in the past number of weeks, the Committee for Social Development has looked at the idea of block leasing good housing stock. We can talk about what constitutes good housing stock in the private rented sector and how that aim can be achieved, whether through mandatory or voluntary registration. The housing would have to meet high quality standards. It would be worth examining the viability of block leasing houses in the private rented sector to people who are on the social housing waiting list. I think that such an initiative is ongoing already.

The Housing Council talked also about better exploitation of joint ventures. There is huge potential in joint ventures in which any number of organisations can work together. Councils could work with the Housing Executive, housing associations and private landlords. All sorts of people could work together in a joint venture model. That is somewhat similar to what happened in the past, but they would have to operate within the rules of procurement to get the necessary injection of cash and finance. That would be worth examining.

The Housing Council talked bravely about rent convergence and the need to tackle the estimated £90 million difference in rents between the Housing Executive stock and housing associations. I know that there is a debate and some conjecture around that. The housing associations say that there is no need for rent convergence and that their average rent is much the same, but the Housing Executive has publicly disputed that. Whatever the case, the Housing Council has raised that issue. I am not saying that it is the answer. I do not know whether it is the answer; more work needs to be done on the issue. I do not have all the facts and figures in front of me, but the Housing Council has raised the issue. Therefore, it is something else to look at.

The Housing Council has touched on a big issue that the housing commission also mentioned. It argued that the Housing Executive should have new governance arrangements. The Housing Executive has £3 billion worth of assets. Sometimes we forget what a major force the Housing Executive is. It can be derided sometimes, as any public body can, but it has done a good job through the years. Independently evaluated, it has maintained some of the finest housing stock in the whole of these islands, if not the whole of Europe,

through long-term, persistent investment in its housing stock. It deserves praise for that.

The Housing Council has realised and others are catching on that, in meeting the objectives that we talked about in delivering on social housing need, the current arrangements are not correct. Those assets that are worth £3 billion — the 90,000 homes in the Housing Executive's ownership across Northern Ireland — have a market value. We do not think of them as assets that have a value; we think of them as homes for people to live in. However, like any property, they have a value. That value may not be as high today as it was five years ago, but one would hope that, in five years' time, the value of those properties would be back up to the value of the past. Those assets should give one the ability to raise finance on the back of them. That cannot be done at present because of where those assets reside in the public sphere.

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

The Housing Council has talked bravely and courageously — what it has said is worth greater exploration, backed up by the likes of the housing commission and its suggestions — about whether we could move and rearrange the Housing Executive so that it has a strategic function. Having a strategic authority would be to our benefit, as Northern Ireland is envied for its region-wide housing authority. We let it do what it does best with regard to policy, but we take the landlord function and, possibly, the development function, which was never taken away from the Housing Executive — the practice is now that it does not happen — and we allow it to borrow on the back of its assets, so that that can be reinvested in its stock, perhaps in developing and maintaining its current stock. We can get a little obsessed — I know that I probably have — with social housing as newbuild. However, the Housing Executive's current stock needs to be maintained on a regular basis. If that does not happen, it will not achieve the high standards that the Savills report highlighted.

There is a need to look at the governance arrangements to see whether there is the scope to adjust the Housing Executive in some way. I know that there are hurdles to get over, including the sizeable debt — the crippling debt — that the Housing Executive carries. That must be examined.

Other ideas are floating about, although they are not necessarily attributable to particular reports. I have heard Members talk about using the assets of the credit unions to help the development of social housing. There are private equity opportunities, although that would not be everyone's cup of tea. At least one private equity firm has developed an interim idea of how it could deliver massive investment in social housing newbuild, and it is worth exploring that.

Other jurisdictions, notably Scotland, have restricted the right to buy. I must lay my cards on the table: I am not in favour of that. However, in the round, it is something that could be explored. Even if we did not restrict the right to buy, there are options about looking at the discount that homebuyers would receive. Looking at that in the round of an improved environment —

Mr F McCann: What the Member says is interesting. Much of what he said comes directly from the recent report by the housing commission, which, hopefully, will generate debate on how we put together an effective housing strategy. It would be foolish of anyone to rule out any aspect of what is on offer or what is being discussed.

We have a responsibility to provide social housing for those most in need. We also have a responsibility to those on low pay. In many ways, housing associations in the private rented sector are out of the reach of those people. The Member referred to the house sales scheme. Over the past 20 years, the Housing Executive has sold off 120,000 houses, and it is becoming almost impossible for it to find re-lets to rehouse people in need. We need to be careful, and we need to continuously build up the stock. We need to ensure that it impacts on the people who need social housing. That does not rule out the possibility of examining a whole range of issues that will allow people to tap into the idea of getting more houses for less money. Developers' contributions and other issues have been up for discussion in the past, but we have not had an effective strategy that will allow us to move forward.

I hope that we can finish the conclusions of the housing commission, take part in that debate and ensure that we have an effective strategy for the next 20 years. That is obviously where the need will be.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member again for his useful intervention. He, I and other Members are coming from the same perspective. We want to see the problems sorted out.

Mr Cobain: Oh.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that even Mr Cobain, who is catcalling, is at one with us. That is probably what is worrying him.

Mrs M Bradley: I am old enough to remember when the Housing Executive had its own direct workforce. That was a time of high deprivation and little housing, yet the Housing Executive was able to house many thousands of people quickly and efficiently by using its own workforce. Perhaps we should consider going back to that system. It may be less costly.

Mr Hamilton: The Member's idea may not be viable due to procurement laws, but I welcome the contribution that she and others have made. I wanted to provoke some thought on the issue of social housing; not in the yah-boo way as has been the case in the past when one side of the House said that there was not enough money, and the other side said that there was, and nothing was done. That approach gets us nowhere, and now is the time to move the debate on.

Other Members and I have mentioned at least 15 different ideas that are currently being discussed, but, by our own admission, we are not the fount of all knowledge —

Mr Weir: Surely not.

Mr Hamilton: Well, perhaps some of us believe that they are the fount of all knowledge.

No doubt there are other ideas. A sizeable number of ideas are floating around at the moment, and they must be tied down in a Northern Ireland context.

I welcome the work that the Northern Ireland housing commission and the Housing Council have done. Indeed, the Committee for Social Development thought it was valuable to make a contribution to the housing commission's key issues paper, and it has unanimously agreed a response to it. I welcome the fact that the Committee agreed to do that. There has been a positive response to that paper, and that is a sign of growing consensus. We may not know which of the dozen to 15 ideas will work best or which

of them will be right for Northern Ireland, but there is consensus that they should be explored.

I am aware that the Department has already taken forward pilot schemes for some of the ideas that I have mentioned, and I welcome that. However, I feel that our guiding principle in social housing should be that the right type of social housing is delivered for the right people, in the right place and at the right time. As I said before, it does not matter to me one jot who built or financed a house or how it was financed. My workload in the first six months as an Assembly Member was dominated by people who needed housing. Demand has perhaps tapered off a little, but it is still pretty steep. For those who still regularly come into my constituency office wanting to be housed it does not matter who built a house or how it was financed, and that should be our guiding principle. We should not get hung up for ideological or historical reasons on the best method of delivering housing. It does not matter to the people who are waiting for years on a housing list whether the Housing Executive is one homogenous group or whether its landlord function is split from its strategic function, so long as there is greater investment.

If we were to take the cocktail of ideas and distil it down to a handful that are viable for Northern Ireland, we would not suddenly wipe out the housing waiting list overnight, but we could make a greater dent in it. The time for mapping out those ideas has long since passed. We must get down to what is viable, credible and doable in delivering more sustainable financing. We must also put all aspects of social housing, including newbuilds, maintenance and supporting people, on a much firmer foundation.

5.15 pm

If I could do anything today, I would send a message to the Minister for Social Development that there is growing consensus across the board, in politics and in society, about the need to address the issue in a much more positive way than simply looking for money. I sympathise with the predicament that she has found herself in over the past couple of years. It has been difficult for her. She has had to take decisions, and, although I may not always agree with those decisions, at least I understand why she has taken them. The system has not been fleet of foot enough to deal with some of those ideas as

quickly as possible. However, that can all be set to one side if a concerted effort is made now.

I encourage the Minister for Social Development to grasp the potential of that growing consensus in the Assembly and outside the Assembly, in the Housing Council and in the work that the housing commission is coming forward with. She should take heed of that growing consensus and come forward with genuinely radical ideas as to how we can put the financing of all aspects of social housing on a much firmer foundation for the future than has been the case until now.

I notice the time. There were lots of other things that I wanted to say at this stage, but I do not think that I will. *[Interruption.]* That has elicited the best response of the day, so perhaps I will go on.

I will go back to the initial point that I made: if we believe that we are going to address the problem in a satisfactory way by continuing to do what we have always done, we are kidding ourselves. If this place is to be about anything, surely it ought to be testing different, new and radical solutions to our problem. If we are going to continue to do what we have always done, what is the point in us being here? We should grasp the nettle that has been presented by the current crisis and seize it as an opportunity to come forward with new, radical and different ideas on how to address the problem.

I encourage the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Finance — finance will have a critical role in any assessment of the viability of those ideas — to take heed of the consensus that exists and bring forward those ideas. If she does that, she will find not only a sympathetic ear but enthusiastic backing for all those proposals.

Mr Weir: I rise as possibly the thirteenth Member to speak, including the Minister, in a debate that has already gone on for almost five hours. *[Interruption.]* I can see that the heckling is already starting. I briefly wondered whether I had been co-opted on to the Committee for Social Development, albeit in a voluntary capacity. I am at least thankful to the Member who spoke before me and who told me earlier in the day that he had two speeches ready: one on the social development aspect of the debate and one on the financial aspect. I am sure that the House shares my gratitude that he kept to one of the two speeches, otherwise we would be here even later tonight.

Mr Hamilton: I thought that I would use the points in my other speech during interventions.

Mr Weir: I am more than happy to take interventions from anyone else in the House, but not Mr Hamilton, because of the dangerous threat that he might launch into another half hour of speaking on the other side of the equation. As the thirteenth Member to speak in a debate that has gone on for five hours — to be perfectly honest, the light at the end of the tunnel of this debate is still a long way off — it is difficult to find anything novel to say, particularly when cast in the role of a mere hobbit, as some of us were when being castigated at an earlier stage. As someone reminded me, the hobbits eventually won in the books, so perhaps I can accept that analogy.

One option would be to indulge in the level of factual accuracy that we got from Mr McNarry earlier, in which case I could regale Members with tales of my successful ascent of Everest, my hat-trick in the World Cup final or the century that I recently scored at Lords. Mr McNarry said a lot of things. I want to respond to a few of the things that have been said in the debate on a more strategic level, but is important to nail at least one of the accusations that Mr McNarry made, which has implications for the Budget. He said that the DUP was involved in a deal with Sinn Féin to secure £20 million of additional money for the Irish language. For anyone who is not as mischievous as Mr McNarry, I highlight the fact that we did not agree to that and we did not negotiate it. Sinn Féin pressed the British Government for additional money and secured it from Westminster, so, even if Mr McNarry's claim were taken at face value, the suggestion that money will be diverted from other projects in Northern Ireland is somewhat erroneous. It will not come from the block grant, and the attempt to draw analogies with our Budget shows the level of mischief that pervaded Mr McNarry's speech.

A range of options have been put before us on a way forward for the Budget. The SDLP and, to some extent, Mr McNarry believe that the panacea is to constantly produce a new Budget and that the success lies in the process. They feel that, rather than what has been put forward, a completely new and radical Budget in each of the past three years would have produced some degree of solution to the current financial position. There are two fundamental flaws in that argument. First, it does not seem to bear

the reality of the reallocations that have taken place in the past number of years. Earlier in the debate, reference was made to the fact that several hundred million pounds, perhaps around £800 million, has been reallocated in combined monitoring rounds in the past three years. That does not even take into account the fact that, as a result of the two major pressures that have emerged in this year's Budget, a reallocation of around £370 million was made around Christmas. The idea that there is not, in that sense, a new Budget and a new budgetary process does not bear a great deal of examination. The second flaw —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Yes, I am happy to give way, as long as it is for less than 28 minutes.

Mr Hamilton: If you do not stop me, I am sure that the Deputy Speaker will. One of the best achievements of the Executive is not connected in any way to having a new Budget: getting rid of the chronic underspend of the past. In the last financial year, there was an underspend of only £27 million, compared with an inherited underspend in the last year of direct rule of £255 million. The Executive have spent £200 million more by virtue of good financial management.

Mr Weir: Undoubtedly, that is the case. Probably for my crimes against the Ulster Unionist Party, I was put on the Finance Committee in 1998-99, and I have had the dubious honour — *[Interruption.]* I hear a degree of heckling from the side, so I am obviously being volunteered as the Assembly scapegoat.

Around the turn of the century and in the period of direct rule, it became abundantly apparent that each monitoring round threw up vast amounts of money. Departments were unable to meet their targets, they were unable to spend their money and there was a degree of weakness because of financial mismanagement. It is clear that there has been a much better system of management, and I will also talk about the reductions that have been made in overcommitment.

The other fundamental flaw in the argument for a new Budget is the underlying assumption that simply producing the appearance of a new Budget will, in some way, generate more income, revenue and capital. However the cake was divided among Departments, it would have remained the same on each Budget, irrespective of

whether an adjustment was made on the initial Budget or whether a fresh Budget was produced. Consequently, a degree of false promise is created by the concept of a new Budget.

The route taken by the Executive was to look at the existing Budget, take account of the pressures and make adjustments accordingly. That suggestion was put forward by the Finance Minister and was endorsed by every party in the Executive through their Ministers, as some Members indicated earlier. I know that the Health Minister has distanced himself from some of that, but there is no doubt that this suggestion was supported. Indeed, when officials were questioned about this, there was no doubt that it was supported by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in the same way as it was supported by Ministers from the Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

The only alternative put forward is some degree of raising additional revenue. During the debate, two alternatives have been suggested. To be fair to Mr Farry, there has been a degree of consistency in his approach and that of the Alliance Party with respect to the golden bullet of the regional rate. They have suggested consistently that increasing the regional rate would greatly ease the financial burden. In a shaft of honesty on the issue and as Mr Farry acknowledged earlier, had the Alliance Party's proposals been accepted at face value and had we seen a rise in the regional rate commensurate with inflation over the past three years, the revenue raised would have been somewhere between £25 million and £30 million. My understanding is that a 1% rise in the regional rate may generate just under £3 million.

Yesterday's motion on the Supply resolution referred to £13 billion and £15 billion. I am reminded of the 1980s and 1990s, when the Liberal Democrats suggested consistently that an extra penny should be added to the rate of income tax. Suddenly, that became the Liberal Democrat's panacea for just about every problem. It seems that the regional rate has become the Alliance Party's panacea for this problem. At least the level of income generated by an extra penny on income tax would have created a much greater effect, proportionately, than a change in the regional rate. I commend Dr Farry for that part of his remarks.

It has been highlighted by a number of Members, including Basil McCrea, that freezing the regional

rate, in conjunction with the other measures taken by the Executive, such as the proposed rate for small business, has alleviated pressures on businesses and the public.

There has also been reference to an all-Ireland economy. That issue has been somewhat flogged to death, so there is probably not a great deal of point in me dealing with it today. The other substantive response from Sinn Féin that the Finance Committee Chairperson and Mitchel McLaughlin gamely pursued was the idea of tax-varying powers. I reiterate some of the remarks that I made about that yesterday. There is real concern that the Treasury would use tax variation as leverage to say that, if we increase income tax by 3% or 4%, it will simply cut the block grant and that, if we want to maintain the same level of services, we should increase income tax correspondingly. I think that it is a wise to have a public debate on that issue, but I caution against going down that route.

A second fundamental concern about tax-varying powers that has not really been put forward up to now relates to the issue of parity. It is accepted throughout the UK that there can be a degree of variation in local rates or the regional rate when it comes to local council services. However, there is a sense of parity when it comes to taxation, which is linked to the sense of parity in social security matters. There is a real danger that, if tax-varying powers are thrown into the lap of the Northern Ireland Executive, a certain amount will also be allocated to us for social security purposes, and we will be left to try to live within our means on that front also.

5.30 pm

Given the level of economic subvention, breaking parity on tax and social security could lead to higher taxation. There is a danger that that would create a pressure on social security bills and put many people at the lowest end of the socio-economic scale under pressures that they would not otherwise have to deal with. At the very least, I caution against taking that route.

Despite the consistent claims of black holes in the Budget, as put forward by the Chamber's amateur astronomer, Mr McNarry, the Executive have lived within their Budget. The £370 million reallocation is due to two factors.

First is the Civil Service pay claim, which was ignored for too long by successive Administrations — by devolved Administrations,

in the early part of the century, and, prior and subsequent to that, by direct rule ones. It is right that we faced up to our responsibilities and met that claim. I understand that some people missed out. However, in dealing with the legal position, the approach taken by the Minister was the right one. From a practical point of view, simply to go back 20 or 30 years and pay out to everyone who served could cost perhaps £1.5 billion rather than £150 million. Those who missed out have, to some degree, a grievance. However, it is not with the current Executive; it is with those who let them down in the past, and, for some, with those who did not give them proper advice.

The second issue, and one that has been consistent, is water charges, which represent about 60% of the £370 million. As Basil McCrea said, that is an area in which we have to face up to some of the hard choices that were made. In deferring water charges, there was an opportunity cost. As the Minister would say, there is no such thing as a free lunch, and, therefore, the implication of meeting those charges will be cuts in other budgets. However, all parties in the Assembly went into the 2007 Assembly elections with a promise — and I have not heard anyone resile from that position — that they would try to protect people from having to pay an excessive amount in water charges. No separate water charge has been imposed, and the effect of the Budget will be that no separate water charge will be imposed over the lifetime of this Assembly. It is right that Members live up to that claim.

As Mr Hamilton said, there has been good management. However, I share the concerns that other Members raised about whether that good management extends beyond the Executive and DFP's handling of the economy to every Department. To use a local example, the failure of the Department of Education to produce details of its capital build is creating uncertainty. There has been criticism of the somewhat irresponsible attitude of the Department of Health, which seems to want to hide under a blanket and hope that this will all pass over. The Budget shelters, to the maximum extent, the Department of Health, as cuts or reductions of its budget are much less than the average that other Departments face.

As Mr Farry said, the Health Department cannot be immune to the overall budgetary situation. If we were to ring-fence the health budget, the

additional burden that that would place on other Departments — on education, on roads maintenance, and on a wide range of other services — would leave us in an appalling situation.

Studies show that there is wide-ranging opportunity in the Department of Health for a strategic look at what changes can be made to ensure that we get the best value for money and that the maximum amount is put towards front line services. I understand that the Minister was reluctant a week or two ago to impose PEDU on his Department. Given the share of the Budget that the Health Department receives, the Minister would be showing a great deal of wisdom if he invited PEDU into his Department to see what structural changes can be made to ensure better value for money.

The Budget follows other measures that have put the economy first. Some of the advantages that the local economy has accrued from previous actions were highlighted by Members, and I do not intend to repeat them. However, it is important that we place the economy at the heart of the agenda. The recession has hit people hard, but there has been work to protect their financial position, and the Enterprise Minister, Arlene Foster, has worked to attract new investment. That work has mitigated some of the circumstances caused by the recession.

Harold Wilson said that if a household has only one person and that person is unemployed, the unemployment rate of the house is 100%; for those who have lost their jobs, that will be of little comfort. However, some people have gained jobs due to the sound economic strategy that the Executive have implemented, which has cushioned the blow.

The reduction in underspend was mentioned. As the Minister said yesterday, over the past couple of years, there has been a reduction in overcommitment from £176 million to £90 million. That figure will eventually disappear completely. That trend is a sign of better financial management from the Executive, because they are ensuring that what is committed to us is spent properly.

As we move towards the future, there will undoubtedly be additional pressures on the Budget. I am sorry to keep coming back to him, but I was struck by Mr McNarry's remark that Northern Ireland would suffer disproportionately from cuts made by the next Government, regardless of who wins the next general election.

That may turn out to be the case. However, it strikes me as strange that, despite UCUNF forming a special relationship with the Conservative Party, it predicts that we will suffer disproportionately from cuts. Perhaps that shows a lack of negotiating skills on UCUNF's part.

Mr Hamilton: Mr McNarry made the enlightening comment, yesterday and today, that Northern Ireland would suffer disproportionately from the type of severe cuts that the shadow Business Secretary was espousing at the weekend. Does the Member agree that, in light of that acknowledgement, it seems very strange that Mr McNarry and his colleagues have sought and invited swingeing cuts that will adversely affect Northern Ireland? Does he also agree that they have done so with a degree of relish?

Mr Weir: Regardless of our political perspectives and whether the next Government is Labour or Conservative, it is important that the Executive unite to deliver the best deal possible for Northern Ireland. That means applying whatever pressure is possible at a national level to minimise whatever budgetary position that we are left in. Although it is important to be realistic, I am concerned that sometimes the remarks of Mr McNarry and others verge on defeatism; they are almost throwing in the towel.

There will be tough times ahead, and, consequently, I want to make my final remarks on the budgetary position. One of the most significant elements of the Budget is the invest to save fund, which the Minister set up. That fund is very different in nature and quality from previous Executive funds, because it enables Departments to make structural changes that can lead to financial gain in the long run.

Everyone can see that the cost of any structural change will always be front-loaded and that the benefits will be realised subsequently. An initial £26 million has been set aside for that. That is the Minister's best guess at what can be afforded at this stage. However, the Minister's appearance before the Committee showed a willingness to increase that fund if other Departments are prepared to bear pain. There is a strong case for long-term investment.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Member agree that Northern Ireland has an unprecedented rate of high deprivation among children? We really need to deal with that issue.

Mr Weir: We need to tackle a wide range of areas. That is why initiatives such as the invest to save fund and PEDU have an important role in ensuring that we get the best possible value out of all money that the Executive receive from the block grant. The money must be focused on front line services, whether to tackle child poverty or other issues.

Members always focus on the pure economic aspects of PEDU because it is seen as saving money for Departments. However, they ignore the wider context at their peril. That is, PEDU is also about how government services are delivered and the benefits that arise from that. There is no doubt that, on an ongoing basis, the proposals for the invest to save fund and PEDU improve the Executive's long-term financial position. The Budget faces up to a degree of responsibility, provides a reasonable share to Departments and, above all, maintains the economy at its heart. Consequently, I commend the Budget to the House.

Mr Savage: I declare an interest as a farmer; my comments will be relevant to that. I broadly support the Budget Bill. However, I want to voice some concerns.

In the past two days, the clear and explicit need for the Executive to balance their books has become apparent. In doing that, cutbacks have been made across the board in all Departments. I want to put on record my concern at how the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had to give back £9.7 million, £3.4 million of which should have been spent on capital projects and the remaining £6.3 million of which should have gone on current expenditure. That has resulted in the postponement of veterinary facilities at Belfast port, of work at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute at Hillsborough and of the financing of environmental schemes. That has a big impact on the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland.

Having said that, I welcome the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's decision to streamline administration costs. That must be only the beginning. I am not calling for job cuts. However, I and many other Members are calling for greater efficiency and greater productivity.

Given that many farms and farm businesses are now classed as small businesses, including those in the private sector, it is incumbent on the Executive to do their utmost, especially when we are, hopefully, coming out of a

recession. Each and every Member must do all within their power to enhance and encourage business development and to send a message far and wide that Northern Ireland is open for business. That will, in turn, greatly assist the growth of our local economy. I have always said — I make no secret about it — that some of the most successful businesses in Northern Ireland started in somebody's backyard.

For that reason, it is important that we promote the ideas and the possibilities of new businesses across our Province. If we do not do that, we have a great roads infrastructure in Northern Ireland that allows us to get in the car and go down to the big enterprise centres that are an hour's drive away and are waiting for us with open arms.

5.45 pm

I appreciate that there are constraints and pressures on the Executive and on their Budget. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has sent out a clear message today to all Departments: no more recruiting and get your houses in order across the board. I assume that that is the Minister's message, and I congratulate him for it.

Let us make no mistake about it: we must do everything to ensure that we are not in a similar position next year. I say to the Minister that if the Executive had been a normally run business, we would have been out of business. We have to get our house in order. Will the Minister assure us that he will do all that he can to ensure that we are not in the same position next year as we are in today?

There is an old saying: anyone can make money, but it takes a wise person to spend it, and to have credibility when it is spent. I look forward to the Minister's response with interest. I know that he has had to listen to Members letting off hot air for the past two days. I want to know how he will address all those issues. Members have duplicated their remarks, probably myself included, and I know that the Minister is in a difficult situation, but he has broad enough shoulders to take it on board and come out fighting. I look forward to his reply.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to make a brief point. A few comments have been made today about the disadvantages and demerits of the all-island working economy. I did not hear an awful lot about that two or three years ago when people

were driving across the border for their fuel and for other business, nor did I hear much about it recently in Sprucefield, Belfast, Newry, Strabane or Derry, for that matter. When we are looking at such issues, we should look at their practical realities and outworkings while people go about their daily business and get on with their lives.

I know that there is a big commitment this evening to be brief, so that is exactly what I will be. Speaking as a recent addition to the membership of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and as my party's spokesperson on agriculture and rural development, I know that the Committee's structure allows it to conduct its business efficiently and effectively. Indeed, you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, have contributed to that. However, as we seek to scrutinise the Department, to view its efficiencies and how it does business, I have to say that I have been singularly unimpressed with a number of issues.

It is apparent that the pressures that the Department faces will have a significant effect on its PSA targets in the Programme for Government. Indeed, there are major issues to consider, such as the gross over-evaluation of the Crossnacreevy site, which resulted in a negative capital investment budget of £174 million. That valuation was totally inaccurate and unsubstantiated by the Department. There is the issue of EU disallowances. The Department may face disallowances arising from non-compliance with EU regulations that govern area-based payment schemes. A disallowance of £30 million has been proposed for 2004-06, with an additional £30 million for 2007-08. The risk of those disallowances being applied in the current budgetary period has been determined by some in the Department as being quite high. That is an issue in the departmental budget itself.

I previously raised the matter of rolled-up modulation and match funding, particularly for the axis 3 elements of the Northern Ireland rural development programme. You were present, a LeasCheann Comhairle, when I raised it. We are in a credit crunch and there is huge, growing unemployment. Those of us who represent rural areas want to see projects that enable job creation, and those projects must be rolled out quickly and efficiently.

I was astonished to learn that a requirement relating to axis 3 funding had not been inserted into the Budget. The Minister of Agriculture and

Rural Development fielded questions about that during Question Time yesterday. It appeared that the rural development programme was moving on, but, on deeper probing, it seemed that there had been glitches and problems along the way. I am glad to see that the Department has woken up to that reality, because that was not apparent from departmental officials who appeared before the Committee. When questioned about match funding, they did not know what the issues or problems were, and they certainly did not offer any solutions.

Those of us who represent and speak for rural areas feel that the investment needs to be made urgently. We need to see economic activity encouraged and jobs created. People who live in rural areas need to see that happening. The nature of agricultural evolution has been that, as pressures have been put on agriculture, many in the farming community diversified into construction. Therefore, we have heavy reliance on construction in many rural areas.

The Department has put in a bid to secure those moneys from rolled-up modulation match funding, totalling some £27 million, which is apparently held by DFP. The Minister is not in his place at the moment, but it would be extremely useful if he could provide us with clarification on that pot of money. Was that application made, has it been received, and what commitments can the Minister give to those of us who are the rural voice that those moneys will be released to provide the catalyst to many of our rural economies to stimulate rural economic activity and to help to create those vital jobs? Two hundred and fifty rural entrepreneurs have already been encouraged and approved by the Department to commence investment in projects, yet the Department did not find itself in a position to match that investment. It is vital that the Minister provides us with that clarification.

The Committee has recognised other issues, such as the land parcel improvement scheme, which is a drive to bring about better compliance with EC area and scheme regulations and reduce the risk of Commission disallowance. As I stated earlier, given that the Department faces a £60 million disallowance, that project would be very useful for improving IT systems, maps, data quality, rules about eligibility of claims and standards of inspection, and it would involve significant cross-departmental working with Land and Property Services. The overall cost is

around £14 million. However, when measured against the potential reduction in future EC disallowance, payback would be achieved within two years.

There are other concerns, including the badger prevalence study. Bovine TB is a complex disease. As a relatively recent recruit to the Committee, I have been trying to get my head around some of the presentations that have been given, as you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, will understand. They are quite technical, scientific and hard to comprehend, as is the nature of the problem. However, the figures are not hard to comprehend.

At £22 million, the TB control programme is one of the most costly, and it addresses very challenging animal health problems. The cost of the badger prevalence study over two years is £2.5 million. There are concerns about the direction, type and quality of that study, as well as the direction of the policy, which does not appear to tackle the increasing TB incident levels.

The eradication of TB will save the public purse in excess of £22 million per annum. A programme to eradicate TB would include the removal of all animals that are susceptible to bovine TB. We need a proper programme to elicit the nature, source, types and causes of TB so that it can be eradicated adequately.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member not accept that, at this stage, a selective cull of badgers may be appropriate in certain areas?

Mr McGlone: I heard one of my constituents Mr Kelso, whom I and many Members know, speaking about that issue on the radio the other morning. He highlighted his concerns about the serious harm caused by badgers and stated that it led to the obliteration of a good part of his premium herd. There are issues to be addressed in respect of that problem. Culling has worked in other areas, but we are yet to see the full details of the proposals.

I am not entirely convinced that culling would work, and I have not bought into the idea entirely. If there is an outbreak of bovine TB in an area where there are badger setts close by and the evidence clearly points to those badgers as the cause, culling is a no-brainer. However, I am not sure whether an overall cull of badgers will achieve anything other than the eradication of badgers.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Elliott, mentioned the fact that DARD officials spoke about the potential for bankruptcy given the financial pressures caused by this problem. Those officials seem to focus on the negative. When the Minister was out of the Chamber, I pointed out the huge potential and support for measures that could be introduced to revitalise rural economies. However, such revitalisation will require the Department to be committed, positive and capable of identifying where the problem lies and coming forward with ideas to deal with it. Rather than officials outlining the range of problems that they face, I would like them to identify solutions that are in their gift.

We need money, and we need money to be realised. We have been told that a bid was made to the Department of Finance and Personnel for the realisation of match funding for axis 3 of the Northern Ireland rural development programme. That bid is an attempt to realise money and allocate it to job creation schemes.

There has been a series of self-inflicted problems in relation to the Budget. Those include the gross overvaluation of the Crossnacreevy site; the continuation of non-compliance with EU scheme rules at a cost of up to £60 million; and the pursuit of a flawed policy on the eradication of bovine TB at a cost of £200 million over the past 10 years. Those essential moneys could have been better used to pump-prime our local economy and to create jobs at a time of credit crunch. There are both latent and acknowledged higher unemployment levels in rural economies, and those economies need investment. The Executive urgently need to spend money efficiently on projects in rural communities.

Having spent time on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, it is with some reservation that I support the Budget. The Department needs to put much more effort into coming up with solutions. I hope that I delivered my contribution with the required brevity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I know that it is getting late, but I remind Members of the Speaker's ruling on not walking in front of a Member who is speaking. Two Members walked in front of Mr McGlone while he was speaking.

6.00 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): For those Members

who may require clarity, I will speak first as Chairperson of the Committee for Education, lest there be any doubt.

It is important for the Committee to place on record what it has already highlighted to the House about the Department's £52 million resource pressure in the 2010-11 Budget and the £40 million pressure that the Minister of Education already has for 2010. That gives a total of £92 million in resource pressures.

The capital budget pressure for education happens to be the same figure of £92 million, which is made up of an Executive-proposed saving of £22 million and £70 million capital requirement to start on-site plan new school build projects in 2010-11. I will return to that issue when I speak as a private Member.

The Minister of Education informed the Committee in her letter of 14 January 2010, and again when she was before the Committee on 3 February, that her main means to address the 2010-11 resource pressure was through a convergence delivery plan to remove duplication, to streamline management and administration in education and to create greater efficiencies. That, of course, was as a result of the fact that the education and skills authority (ESA) did not come into existence on 1 January 2010. I hope to expand on that point in a moment.

In her letter to the Committee, the Minister said that it will be critical now more than ever to ensure that the convergence programme is implemented quickly and effectively. The Committee was informed by a departmental official on 3 February 2010, in the presence of the Minister of Education:

"We hope to achieve the same level of savings"

as under the ESA plan. That is, savings of £21 million per annum by cutting some 430 management posts. That was on the basis of a £50 million ESA Invest to Save fund. The Committee was also told that the Minister was lodging a bid to get back some of the £23 million of ESA money that she surrendered to the Invest to Save scheme.

The Committee has repeatedly asked for sight of what it deems to be a critical piece of information; namely, the convergence plan. We have a letter dated 10 February 2010 from departmental officials that says that the plan will be sent to the Committee "at the

appropriate time", which obviously means after the education and library boards have been briefed on the matter.

In a letter to the Committee dated 14 January 2010, the Minister wrote:

"I am keen to obtain the views of the Education Committee."

The Committee for Education wishes to fulfil its statutory duty to scrutinise, consider and advise on the Department's budget. Clearly, however, the Committee cannot do any of that unless it is provided with the detailed plan and detailed information, is fully briefed on that plan and has the ability to question the Department on the consequences of going down a particular route.

Time is moving on, and the beginning of the new financial year will soon be upon us, yet the Committee remains in the position of not having had any sight of that critical and, what I would call, high-risk plan, as we move towards a convergence in the reconstituted education and library boards.

As to capital pressures in the education budget for 2010-11, the Committee is in a similar position. It has asked the Minister repeatedly for information on the review of the education capital programme. The Committee is concerned as to what criteria the Minister may adopt to prioritise school building projects, some 80 of which are approved and await construction.

That ends my comments as Chairperson of the Education Committee. I turn to the issues that have been raised as a result of some of the points I have made.

Members need to be aware of one fact: politics is often seen as a confrontation between my party and that opposite, or as a battle of ideologies, because of the Minister of Education. However, let me say this: none of us, whatever our party, can escape the crisis over the lack of funding in education. The issues that I want to address will highlight the serious financial position in which education finds itself.

It is easy to come to the House with wish lists. I wish that the parties in this House had not so many political wish lists. All their rhetoric — about the need to have the children at the centre of all we do, how much we care for the children and how much we are concerned for the future of those children — is reflected in political realities when it comes to asking for

money, even if it happens to come from the British Exchequer and Government. We all need a reality check, and I include myself in that, when it comes to prioritising for all our children's futures and not just for a select number.

Before I talk about the detail of some of those things, I will comment on some points which the Minister of Finance, my colleague Mr Wilson, made yesterday in his winding-up speech when, unfortunately, I was not in the House. He referred to comments that I had made with respect to the £9 million capital and the STEM money, which are important issues for education. The Minister said that that money:

"was rightly surrendered because the rest of the money had not been used for the purposes for which it was given." — [Official Report, Vol 48, No 3, p165, col 1].

That is absolutely correct, and the Minister was right to highlight it. There are rules that govern the surrender of moneys. However, the point I was trying to make, which cannot have been well made for it bears repeating, is that the failure lies with Departments that do not have the foresight or the mechanisms available to identify situations which inevitably lead to the surrender of money.

With respect to the capital surrendered by the Department of Education, how have we come to a situation where there is almost a £92 million shortfall in capital, but £9 million is surrendered? One needs no crystal ball if there is an investment strategy and if, according to the Department's own documentation, it has a maintenance survey that is carried out on an ongoing basis. Problems ought to be clearly identified and well known. That was the point I wanted to make: not only the Minister of Finance, but every Minister, should be able, with all the mechanics of Government at their disposal, to identify the way in which the money could be spent in a more strategic and long-term manner. That would lead to better efficiency.

I have heard Members make comments today about the merits of monitoring rounds, and whether, as a system, those are the best way to redistribute money. Departmental efficiency in identifying clearly what they want money for ought to be a priority.

Mr Elliott: The Member indicated that the education budget was £92 million short with respect to capital, yet £9 million was returned

— I apologise if I have gotten those figures slightly wrong. The Minister of Education and her departmental officials are not here at the moment to give us an explanation. Can the Member explain how those figures came about? It is intriguing that despite such a shortfall, money was still handed back.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: I think that Mr McGlone made reference to the difficulty: whenever one asks officials why a particular amount of money was surrendered, one gets into all sorts of technical arguments about why they were not able to spend the money. However, the explanation given was that there were no off-the-shelf projects at that time that would have fulfilled the criteria and enabled the £9 million to be spent. That is the reason why I am saying that there should be more forethought and advanced-planning on how a certain amount of money is spent, given the fact that the second largest budget in this House is for education.

I appreciate that there are particular variants when it comes to determining where a school is built because of issues relating to numbers and sustainability. I also appreciate that demographics change. Over a period of time, however, there must have been a considerable degree of stability that allowed for the identification of projects that could have been ready to go; but that did not happen and the money had to be surrendered.

Mr McCartney: Earlier today during Question Time, it was put to a Minister that there were on-the-shelf projects that were ready to go forward. However, the Minister said that those did not proceed because of other reasons. Projects may be in on-the-shelf positions, but that does not necessarily mean that they are easily transferred. That can explain why money is handed back.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: I appreciate what the Member has said. The way in which our business is carried out becomes very technical and bureaucratic, and I think that that leads many of us to frustration. Sometimes, it seems as though we have a system that has a presumption against rather than a presumption in favour, and we run the risk of thinking that the glass is half empty rather than half full.

Recently, I visited a new school in Fivemiletown, which borders my colleague's constituency of

Fermanagh and South Tyrone. When one sees new schools, one appreciates that there has been investment in education. When we see the new school that was built not far from this building, we all appreciate the value that that brings to the educational experience. However, that is cold comfort to schools that have been on a list for six years. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School. Some schools have been through all of the various categories and stages of procurement, and are now told that they will be put back into a bigger pot. They are being put back into the educational washing machine. They may also have to go through the spin dryer, and we do not know what will come out. That is not a very fair way of dealing with the issue of newbuilds for schools.

6.15 pm

I will return to capital spending issues in a moment or two, but I come now to an issue of real concern that I mentioned earlier: the convergence plan. I welcome that, at long last, and despite telling me in a letter 18 months ago that it was not possible to do what she is embarking upon, the Minister is working on a convergence plan that will be based upon reconstituted education and library boards. What the Minister tells us, the statements that are made and the papers that are issued all contain the term “transitional”. There is no such thing as a transitional education and library board. Education and library boards will be reconstituted under the law, subject to the House and the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. It is paramount to make that very clear. The Minister told the House some time ago that those policies would be within the law.

The important financial point is that the 1986 Order includes a provision that allows education and library boards to have voluntarily agreed services. That already happens with legal services, on which the South Eastern Education and Library Board leads. The Western Education and Library Board leads on C2k. Boards already have collaborative mechanisms, which, to a degree, could be described as convergence. However, and I hope that the point that I am about to make is conveyed to the Minister, any attempt to bring about convergence outside the law, or to dilute the legal position of the composition of education and library boards, will not be accepted, because that goes to the

heart of equality of treatment. I would be very disappointed if the Education Minister were not in favour of equality, but I would not be surprised if she tried to do something else.

If we set aside those caveats, why is the convergence plan important? It is important that the structures, as they are, deliver efficiency. I raised that issue earlier, when I referred to my colleague Mr O’Loan as we discussed the redeployment of public sector jobs. It is important that County Hall retains its position as the employer of a considerable number of people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to be seated. We are discussing the Budget Bill. I have given a fair bit of latitude to education issues, but the Member must return his focus to the Budget and how it relates to education.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is the point. If efficiencies are to be made; if the Budget clearly indicates that efficiency savings must be made and baselines have to be changed, we cannot ignore the consequences of taking that route. The convergence plan is a key element of the way in which efficiencies will be delivered. That is because the current educational structure has five education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), all of which cost money and duplicate service delivery in some form.

I now come to capital works, which is a serious issue for the Department of Education’s budget. Departmental officials have said that there will be no capital works in 2010-11. The Minister clarified that by taking the unusual action of issuing a statement on 11 February to say that there will be approximately £170 million of capital spend. Speaking as Chairperson of the Education Committee, I highlighted that we still have not seen the criteria that the Minister will use to determine where schools will be built.

In previous correspondence to the Committee for Education, the Department set out the criteria that would be considered when determining how or when a school will be built. However, I am worried about the amount of promised school builds that will not go ahead because of a separate agenda to facilitate a particular sector and to disadvantage another. Therefore, the capital build issue is important, and the budgetary pressure that has been brought to bear will complicate the situation when we come to consider newbuilds.

I shall conclude by raising an issue of grave concern, namely whether numeracy is a problem in the Department as well as in schools. That has a bearing on the education budget, because it impacts on how money is spent and on how the Department plans to use its money. The Minister announced that prep-school funding will be removed. Currently, children who attend prep schools are subsidised by some £800 a year; whereas, the amount of money that goes to a child in a primary school varies between £1,200 a year and slightly more than £2,000 a year. The Minister of Education has not done the sums, because, if we end up in a situation in which that £800 is removed, that will place an additional pressure on the education budget of some £5 million per annum. Currently, it costs £2 million a year to educate 2,500 children in prep schools. However, if those schools do not receive funding and those children are dispersed into the education system, it will cost £5 million a year to educate them. Let us do a simple sum. In total, there are approximately 3,900 primary and post-primary schoolchildren in the Irish-medium sector. The Department of Education, through the Minister of Finance and Personnel, gives roughly £5,000 for each pupil per annum to Irish-medium schools. However, prep schools achieve outcomes for £800 for each pupil per annum. I suspect that we get better value for money from prep schools. Therefore, when it comes to considering how we finance schools, we must move away from platitudes and into the realm of reality.

Realistically, major problems lie ahead. Let us celebrate our successes and welcome the investment that has been made. However, given the difficult financial circumstances ahead, in which the delivery of reductions could cause, in the Minister's words, "some pain" and given the small amount of money available — 70% of the education budget is spent on salaries — prudence ought to be the order of the day. Actions should be guided by informed decisions and based not merely on ideology but on objective criteria that we can all see and judge.

Dr McDonnell: Unlike others, I will aim to get the prize for the shortest speech rather than the longest one. I believe that the Budget can, and should always, be used to trigger economic change, where possible, and be a catalyst for positive change in our economy, and I am worried that that has not happened here.

We are living in tight, difficult times, but some innovation and initiative needs to be built in that will make a difference. We will always have differences of opinion, and, God knows, we have heard plenty of them today, but, to my mind, that is a good thing, because it allows us to tease out the good, the bad and the ugly.

I have many concerns across many of the Departments and views as to how we might spend our money better and more efficiently in every Department. However, in the interests of brevity, I shall focus mainly on one or two particular aspects of the economy, or rather the opportunity that we might take to stimulate the economy and prepare it for a better day ahead when a recovery comes.

I was one of a privileged few Members today — I think there were only two of us — who bothered to look in at the launch by the Economic Reform Group of a further case for a reduced rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland, and I was very impressed with the efforts that it made. The group produced a useful document, and I have given the Minister his copy and hope that he has pleasant bedtime reading tonight. However, it reopens the whole corporation tax debate, and I feel that we need to move on it.

The debate ran for the past 15 years and was shot down three years ago by Varney and by Gordon Brown, but this report does more than just deal with corporation tax; it puts the economy and economic issues and challenges back at the heart of our political debate. It tells us that, 12 years after the Good Friday Agreement, viewed from a British perspective, we are still the poorest of the many regions. Unemployment dropped initially, but it has risen again to the point where we are the third-worst region. There is a tremendous need for tax-varying powers, and we have not even begun to tackle that challenge yet. There is a need outlined here for reduced corporation tax, and we need to reopen that debate and robustly take responsibility in the Chamber, because we need a partnership between the political community that inhabits the Chamber, the academic community out there that has the bright ideas, and the business community that puts the ideas into action.

The corporation tax models show that it would be self-funding. It would begin to balance itself after as little as six years, and certainly after 10 years, and any investment or initial losses

would be fully clawed back after 11 years. Some 90,000 extra jobs would be created over 20 years, and, despite what we were told before, EU rules permit the reduction of corporation tax in a region within a member state. Reduced tax rates were declared legal under the Azores judgement in the European Court of Justice in 2006. In the end, even Varney conceded — even though it had to be dragged out of him tooth and nail — that it was legal and possible if there was the political will to do it.

I will admit that corporation tax is only part of the equation. We must use the Budget as a catalyst to trigger economic growth in general. I would have liked to have seen some more comfort for the hard-pressed construction industry. Two men were telling me this afternoon that, two years ago, they employed 200 people, and, today, they employ 130, and they are struggling to keep that workforce going. That is a serious difficulty, and it affects every one of us, because our friends, neighbours and relatives are caught up in that.

Like Dominic Bradley, I would have liked to have seen some greater effort towards building schools.

That would have greatly helped the education system and the construction industry. I would have liked to have seen greater development of new social housing, which, again, would have given comfort to the beleaguered construction industry and taken it out of its difficulties.

6.30 pm

I return to my main point: in the medium and long term, the economy and its ability to generate wealth will determine the quality of our lives. The Budget should not just look at balancing the books in the narrow sense, important as that may be; it should, in many ways, provide seedcorn for our economic future. It must lay the foundations for a better economic future.

I want to draw particular attention to one point: in my mind, the seedcorn for the future of the economy is R&D. The Assembly has failed to invest in that area. The Budget does not indicate or appear to invest enough attention and resources in R&D. If the Assembly allows that failure to continue in future Budgets, our place in the global economy will be in serious difficulty. In the future, the Budget must prioritise R&D and innovation to ensure that

the economy is positioned to succeed when the recovery comes.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate. I thank the Minister for being here. I am amazed that he is still awake after some of the long speeches that have been made. I was keen to hear the wide-ranging debate that Members were allowed to have, which has ranged from European policy to many discussions on Hillsborough, but I want to make one or two key little points on the Budget.

Earlier, the DUP Member for Strangford made a speech that was one of the most disgraceful that I have ever heard. He claimed that he would make 14 points and then made seven. Most of his speech was full of innuendoes, inaccuracies, errors and petty point scoring and actually did not add to the debate. I am in the Chamber waiting for the debate on the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill to start. The Member's speech incensed me so much that I thought that I would just stand here and say my penny's worth. Had he been a football player, he would have got a red card.

Members should look at the speeches from the debate and think about the cost of it. Think of the Minister, who has sat here for six hours, the MLAs who are waiting around upstairs and the staff, who are all waiting. Despite that, the debate has not really achieved a great deal. We see that frequently. Often, there are unnecessary debates. The Health Minister has had to respond to 60 motions. I believe that the nearest number of motions to which another Minister has had to respond is 30. Think of all of the time that is wasted by Ministers in planning for debates to ensure that they have the right answers. The same goes for unnecessary questions for written answer. The Assembly must review the way that it does business. It is relevant to point that out in the Budget debate because people's time and money are being wasted. The Assembly needs a reality check.

The Member said that he wants more houses to be built. Who will buy them? The Assembly wants more social houses. However, DSD needs more money. His points continued very much along the same line. There was a great deal of self-congratulation and many interruptions from Members on his own side, who, sadly, have all left the Chamber. It did not achieve anything.

The Northern Ireland public want to see proper debate. They want to see a functional Government who talk to one another and work with consensus. I reiterate Mr McCrea's point, which was that the real test is education. If agreement cannot be reached on education, progress cannot be made on anything else. The public want the Assembly to concentrate on what matters to them, which is education and health, not make endless little snide comments about the Health Minister's budget being cut. The Health Minister is the only one in Europe whose budget is being cut. Therefore, the Assembly should fight his case.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

The Member has accused another Member of inaccuracy, innuendo and wasting the Assembly's time. Perhaps he should have checked his facts before he stood up and made the inaccurate statement that he has just made. In England, the health budget has been cut by £4 billion this year, which is a much greater cut per head of population than the reduction that the Health Minister in Northern Ireland has been asked to make. If the Member is going to accuse other Members of inaccuracies, perhaps he could get his own facts right.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you, Minister, for correcting me. I was under the impression that the health budget in England had been frozen. I will take back my comment about that, but there were many other inaccuracies.

We also want to see the economy and the employment situation improve. Those are the issues that matter to people. We want to see a Government who function.

I congratulate the Members who made constructive contributions today. We have had long and very good speeches from many, although there are some who, I think, prefer the sound of their own voice. However, some of you might accuse me of that in a minute.

Mr McCartney: Name and shame.

Mr Kinahan: I would love to, but I will not. When I listen to debates, I find that too often parties spend their lives attacking each other rather than being constructive. There were numerous occasions today when the DUP attacked the UUP. I found that strange, since, a few weeks ago, they were trying to talk to us and wanted to work with us. At the same time, they attacked our links with the Conservatives. However, who was at Hatfield House

a few weeks ago talking to the Conservatives? Jonathan Bell talked about a Conservative member's blog, in which the Conservative criticised the Orange Order. That individual has been disowned by the Conservatives. I think that I needed to make that point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member needs to return to the motion. It is getting late in the day.

Mr Kinahan: It is on my next card, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am member of the Committee for Regional Development. In my patch, a new dual carriageway to motorway scale is being built on the A8 and the A6. When it comes to roads, let us concentrate on maintaining the roads in the countryside and everywhere else before we commence the new large projects. They are necessary, but they do not need to be done today.

The Final Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill will be debated later this evening. We have hard choices to make about water. Let us get ourselves ready for the future with regard to water, ensure that we have got the data right and ensure that we budget our way out of the problems in the future.

I am also a member of the Committee for the Environment, where we have seen the great new computer system, e-PIC, fail us, as mentioned by Alastair Ross. It constantly develops problems and keeps costing more. When looking at budgets when times are hard, we should avoid moving down the new route when we do not fully understand it.

I want to see better government. I apologise for some of the criticisms that I made, but they had to be made.

Mr Gallagher: I am a member of the Committee for Regional Development, as is Danny Kinahan, and I want to add to his comments on the roads budget. I cannot overstate the importance of improving the roads budget, particularly for road maintenance. A detailed report on the state of our roads has been published since the most recent Budget was agreed here. The work was carried out by Professor Snaith. The report identified the backlog of required road maintenance and the sum of money that would be required to address that backlog. We would need to spend £700 million, if we had it, on clearing the backlog of required road maintenance. Failing that, the report stated that £109 million per year was required to prevent any further deterioration of our roads.

The roads in Fermanagh and Tyrone, in particular, are in need of maintenance. That is important in itself, but it is important for the economy of those areas, where there is no rail transport and where public transport is poor.

The Minister for Regional Development is not required to be here for this debate, but I want to refer to the Department's strategy in bidding for money for roads maintenance and other things. We have discussed that in Committee. To put in one or two bids per year, as DRD is doing, and hope for some top-ups from the monitoring rounds is not the best strategy. Given the picture that I have painted of the state of our roads, DRD should have a strategy that will have a better chance of achieving closer to the £109 million a year that I mentioned.

Every Member accepts that, in the difficult economic climate, we do not want householders to be put out any more. However, the water subsidy runs out at the end of March, and the cost of supporting Northern Ireland Water must be found from somewhere. Can the Minister tell us what effect ending the water subsidy will have on the Budget in the next financial year?

The cuts in the health budget have been mentioned: more than £20 million on capital costs and close to £90 million, as I understand it, on recurrent costs. That will have an impact all over the Health Service, not least on the elderly and other weak and vulnerable members of the community who are in need of healthcare. Is the Minister aware of the impact that those cuts will have on the plans and the financial arrangements for the new hospital in Omagh? Although the new hospital in Enniskillen is going ahead and, hopefully, will be almost complete in another year, the healthcare arrangements in the south-west are based on two sites and encompass two new hospitals, one in Enniskillen and one in Omagh, and we need to make progress with both those projects.

Several Members, mainly from the DUP, referred to North/South arrangements. They said that certain moneys could be found by cutting North/South arrangements and North/South structures. The North/South arrangements are part of the Good Friday Agreement. We have the North/South structures for the nationalist community and the east-west structures for the unionist community. The unionist community can have its east-west structures. That is fine; it is not a problem. However, the nationalist

community will have its North/South structures. They will not be pared away, and they will survive any attempt by any party to cut back on them. The North/South structures contribute to the economy. Tourism Ireland, InterTradeIreland and Waterways Ireland strengthen and put money into the economy and create jobs. Therefore, it is important to support those organisations and to do more for them. We should do much more for the North/South arrangements than we have done during the lifetime of this Executive.

6.45 pm

Mr Attwood: I want to pick up on some of the issues that I raised in my speech yesterday on the spring Supplementary Estimates. The SDLP's essential point and that of other parties is that for Ireland to position itself in the global economy post-recession, bearing in mind the financial constraints and the nature of other competing economies, the North/South aspect needs to be deepened. To be fair to the Minister, he replied to that yesterday. He made some comments that appeared to acknowledge and affirm some of the opportunities that exist with North/South bodies. The Minister said he recognised that:

"economies are integrated: what happens on the other side of the border will have an impact here. If there is prosperity in the Republic, there is the chance of prosperity here."

That was a fair comment and a good observation from the Minister, but he then added that:

"I just do not happen to believe that we need to do that by setting up expensive structures. It should be sufficient for Ministers to work genuinely to encourage co-operation between two states that have an impact on each other's economies ... I am fully committed to that dialogue." — [Official Report, Vol 48, No 3, p164, col 2].

However, that actually misses the point for three reasons. I tried to go out of my way yesterday on behalf of the SDLP to acknowledge that the Minister has adopted a pragmatic approach to some of the issues that affect the economies of Ireland and the interests of the island, but the attitude that we do not need to set up expensive structures and that it should be sufficient for Ministers to work genuinely to encourage co-operation is not the full response that is required for three reasons.

First, if the current Minister of Finance examines the record of his predecessor Nigel Dodds,

both as Minister of Finance and as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, he will find that Mr Dodds had to be dragged kicking and screaming to meetings with Ministers in the Republic of Ireland on matters of common concern and mutual benefit to the economies and the peoples north and south. Even on that basis alone, it is not sufficient to leave it to Ministers to work genuinely to encourage co-operation, because it falls to the whim of any one Minister to go beyond genuine co-operation or fall short of it. Mr Dodds fell very short of genuine co-operation, never mind the SDLP's conception of full-blown North/South co-operation.

Even if the Minister does not accept that argument, he has been contradictory. He said yesterday that:

"I am fully committed to that dialogue. Indeed, this week, I will again meet the Finance Minister in Dublin to talk about banking, among other issues."
— [Official Report, Vol 48, No 3, p165, col 1].

The reason why the Minister is talking to his counterpart in the Dublin Government is the threat to the island economy caused by the banking crisis. Without prejudice to NAMA as a proposal, an expensive structure has been created, with an advisory council with people from the North on it, to deal with a threat to the national interest. On one hand, the Minister has said that:

"I just do not happen to believe that we need to do that by setting up expensive structures. It should be sufficient for Ministers to work genuinely to encourage co-operation".

Yet, at the very same moment he is going to Dublin to discuss with the Minister for Finance an expensive structure that has been set up to safeguard the economies and the banking system north and south.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is a huge distinction between a North/South body that is set up primarily for political reasons and NAMA, which is set up for operational reasons. NAMA has been set up to look at how toxic accounts that are held in banks are dealt with and managed over a period of time. I do not know whether NAMA will be expensive, but the Member is trying to draw a parallel between expensive political North/South bodies and a body that actually has an operational reason for its existence. However, he probably knows full

well that there is a distinction to be made and that he should make it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to return to the Budget debate.

Mr Attwood: I am taking up themes from yesterday's debate that run across and weave in and out of the budget of virtually every Department. If you look at the Budget, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will see in virtually every budget line for every Department specific budget streams for North/South issues. Therefore, my points deal very much with the Budget debate.

I will return to the Minister's point. When he reads what he has just said in tomorrow's Hansard report, I wonder whether he will find it curious to see that he has conceded the very point that I was making. He accepts that, where there are operational reasons, there could be a North/South body, including an expensive body such as NAMA. That has significant consequences, Minister, because, if you accept that there are issues on this island, North and South, that for operational reasons require a body to be in place, I warmly welcome that.

That moves the debate on North/South issues to a new dimension. The Minister, on behalf of the DUP and the Executive, is saying that there should be a body if there is an operational imperative for one, if it affects the North and South and if it is important to the economies of the North and South. I completely concur, and I thank the Minister for what he has just accepted.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am not going to engage with that.

Mr Attwood: I know that you are not going to reply to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address his remarks through the Chair. This is not a debate about North/South bodies or co-operation; it is about the Budget, so I ask the Member to return to the debate.

Mr Attwood: I appreciate that. I will return to the Budget and outline the third reason that I thought that the Minister was wrong yesterday.

When one looks at the Budget, some things jump out dramatically. Even if the Minister had not said what he just said about the operational reasons of such a body and even if he did not accept what I said about his predecessor, there

are areas of the Budget that would save money, maximise efficiency and serve the interests of people north and south if they were developed on a North/South basis. If anyone were to look at the economic, health and innovation elements of the Budget, they would see examples of that.

Sourcing my comments in the Budget, I ask the Minister whether he accepts some core points. Let me start with the issue of health. Although there may be some debate about what the percentages are — the Minister of Health may not necessarily concur with these points — 48p of every pound of the Budget that is spent in the North is spent on health.

Lord Morrow: Yes.

Mr Attwood: I thank Lord Morrow for confirming that. In the South, a minimum of 25% of every euro is spent on health. Even that is an underestimation, because some health spending in the South is not generated in the Department of Health. Therefore, around 33% of every euro and every pound spent on the island of Ireland is spent on health. I suggest to the House and to the Minister that, if we cannot get our heads around that, we are missing enormous opportunities, because, more than any other sector of public expenditure on this island, health proves the case for “North/Southerly”, for better budget spending both north and south and for better budget planning in the Budget that we are discussing.

I will give some examples. As I understand it, the Health Departments, North and South, commissioned a report on how to develop North/South health co-operation. That report made 37 recommendations, but it has not yet seen the light of day. In the next six months and certainly if the Tories are in power, the Minister will have to come to the House with some bad news. That bad news can, to some extent, be mitigated by looking at the health budgets, North and South, and at the 37 recommendations in respect of future health provision in the North.

One of the costs of partition is that there are doctors on each side of the border, there are specialties in Belfast and Dublin, and there are two bureaucracies. There is duplication all over the place, and it costs an enormous amount of money. Without prejudice to all the other points that I made, if the Executive do not get their head around that report, publish it and take

forward its recommendations, we will be cutting off our nose to spite our face when it comes to future finance on this island.

If the issue is put down to some narrow concerns, the irony of it all is that Belfast and the regional hospitals in the North that have specialties would be the main beneficiaries of better integration and co-operation in health services generally, because some of the specialties and skills are in the Northern Health Service rather than the Southern health services. Even if the issue were viewed in narrow terms, therefore, there would be benefits to and a money flow into the Health Service in the North. That issue should be addressed, but, if we do not engage in that debate, the Minister will have bad news for people on front line health services in the event of budgetary constraints from London, and that is not a healthy way to go when there is an alternative.

I understand that Alasdair McDonnell gave the Minister some bedtime reading in relation to the economic report that was issued earlier today in the Building. I want to hand the Minister a report for daytime reading: it is the comprehensive study on the all-island economy that the British and Irish Governments published a number of years ago. It gathers dust somewhere in the bureaucracy of the Government. If we do not take that report forward and if we do not deal with the issues that affect this Budget Bill and every future Budget Bill, we will be cutting off our nose to spite our face. The foreword to the report states that it:

“sets out a compelling vision of a strong competitive and socially inclusive island economy with island wide clusters whose strength and development is not impaired by the existence of a political border. This must be our aim if we are to compete on the world stage and deliver sustained economic benefits for everyone.”

That is a summary of what I was trying to say yesterday. It is especially relevant post-recession and in a global market that is aware of the growing Far Eastern and Chinese economies and of the three billion people who live in Latin America, who are beginning to compete more aggressively in the world economy, with prices that are cheaper than our island economy. If we do not take on board that compelling vision of island-wide clusters, whose strength and development is not impaired by the existence of a political border, we will live to regret the outcomes.

The report, which is 60 pages long, states that greater co-operation in:

“health and education, can result in more efficient use of new facilities, better value for money, more balanced regional development and improved access to services and facilities throughout the island.”

If that does not become a term of reference for this Budget Bill and every future Budget Bill and everything that the Minister proposes and which the Executive plan, we are missing out gravely.

7.00 pm

I will make two further points. I wish to flag up the issue of capital projects, in particular the policing college and the proposed mother-and-baby hospital in west Belfast, to learn how those will be funded in the coming financial year and future financial years.

I am sure that the Minister will appreciate my concerns about the policing college because of the period that he spent on the Policing Board. He might have gathered from correspondence from the Policing Board that there is an anxiety, to put it mildly, about the devolution of justice and policing, which cannot come a day too soon. Policing Board members are concerned that the block grant will be transferred en masse, that the Minister or some of his colleagues around the Executive table will try to cream off some of that budget line for purposes other than policing and justice and that that might have consequences for the overall shape and character of policing and justice in a devolved context. It may have particular consequences for the policing college. The police have advised the Policing Board, as the NIO will confirm, that the policing college proposal is at a very delicate stage. That is because the management board of the policing college will have to commit significant funds in the near future in order to take that project forward. I am sure that Mr Spratt, who sits on the Policing Board, will concur that that view is being expressed at the moment.

As a consequence of that, in the earliest days of the devolution of justice and policing powers, a definitive, final, unambiguous and irreversible decision must be taken on whether to go ahead with the policing college. I hope that that will happen. I hope that there will not be gremlins in the system and that further uncertainty will not arise, given that that project has been plagued by uncertainty over the years. If the Minister is not in a position to comment today on capital

projects in general and on the policing college in particular, because policing and justice powers have not yet been devolved, I ask that that he ensures that there is no further uncertainty about the policing college being rolled out and that that will be taken forward urgently at the point of devolution.

I wish to refer also to a constituency issue about the proposed mother-and-baby hospital at the Royal Victoria site. The Minister will be aware — I know that this issue perhaps crosses over to the health side of the Budget — that there is some hope that one part of the mother-and-baby hospital might be built and be operational by 2017. Although there was a proposal many years ago to build more than one mother-and-baby hospital, it appears that the height of the Government and the Minister's ambition at the moment is to build one hospital by 2017. All the mothers and children who have been accommodated at the Royal and all the nurses and doctors who have provided an excellent service over the years require certainty about whether that project is going ahead.

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

I wish to put down a strong and stark marker. Somewhere in the system, I presume that civil servants are beginning to mutter that a hospital for children and babies should not be located at the Royal site at all but, rather, that it should be located elsewhere or bi-located in south Belfast and Dundonald, because they think that that would be cheaper. I do not know what the truth of that is, but I heard hints at a meeting with the Minister on 18 January that that project may be located or bi-located elsewhere. Over and above wanting to hear confirmation of the financial commitments to that hospital, I want to hear a commitment that it will be on the Royal site.

We cannot lead patients and families up and down the hill only to declare subsequently that the hospital will not even be in the constituency of West Belfast. We cannot have a situation in which a hospital of that pedigree and character, which has served people so well over the years in an area of extreme need and disadvantage, is suddenly, in a puff of smoke, moved elsewhere. We cannot have a situation whereby the hospital, despite the best clinical advice from Mr Donaldson and many others over the years that hospital services for mothers and babies must be co-located because of clinical, surgical and medical needs, ends up, in a puff of smoke, being split.

I will hear whether the Minister can offer any reassurance on that matter when he replies to the debate. Such a move was hinted at during my meeting with the Minister on 18 January 2009. I put down a marker now that if, after all this time, that should come to fruition, it would be intolerable. It would be a slap in the face for doctors, nurses, patients and families, and for West Belfast.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister will be glad to hear that I do not intend to rehearse the points that I made yesterday. However, I start by referring back to 25 October 2007, when his predecessor, Mr Robinson, laid down the Budget that we are still debating tonight. I want to pick out a couple of passages that are a relevant anchor to my comments.

Mr Robinson said:

"The days of direct rule Budgets with Labour Party priorities are over. This draft Budget comes with the proud stamp: "Made in Northern Ireland"." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p491, col 1].

He then said that success lay in our hands and that we must seize the opportunities that are before us. "Hear, hear", we all say to that. He said that the first draft Budget of the new era must lay the foundations for a better and stronger North.

Mr Robinson went on to talk about the importance of the economy and why it was central to the Budget, the three-year budgetary cycle, and the Programme for Government. He said:

"Despite that favourable transformation in the labour market, there has been no material improvement in our relative prosperity. Indeed, our GVA (gross value added) per capita, when benchmarked against the UK average, has actually deteriorated in the past five years.

That is confirmation of the fact that we must change tack in economic development policy, and it is a warning that we cannot be complacent about the serious economic challenges that confront us. The focus should now be on creating better jobs — not just more jobs." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p494, col 1].

There is no question that we all agree with that. Had the situation not changed so much and had there been no world recession, we would probably still be celebrating those words and some degree of success. However, only last year, the independent review of economic policy noted a serious disconnect between the stated

commitment to the economy and the Executive's follow-through on the delivery of an economic revolution.

As I said yesterday, I wish that we were debating a new Budget. I wish that it was a Budget for today and that it was made not merely for Northern Ireland but for the Northern Ireland of 2010, with all the problems and pressures that we face and all the new opportunities that we enjoy. Such a Budget would take account of the Matrix report and of the innovation opportunities in the region and across the island. It would be willing to explore new and imaginative revenue-raising opportunities, something which, for some reason, the Department of Finance and Personnel has been reluctant to do since its first devolved incarnation in 2001-02.

Why, in this region, can we not have a debate about simple developments, such as home insulation programmes that could be funded through a charge on property? That would release money back into the local economy, and it would stimulate employment in many rural areas through the use of contractors and other skilled personnel. Why can we not have a debate about renewables at the domestic level of micro-renewables? Again, that could be funded through levying charges on property. That power is already in our hands, and, as a former Minister of the Environment, the Minister of Finance and Personnel will know that it was often exercised by the former Environment and Heritage Service in an attempt to protect listed buildings.

Why can we not have debates that explore the opportunities of the smallness of our region yet take advantage of the great potential beneath our feet? In 2006-07, that potential was recognised by the Tellus survey, which found that our resource base was more favourable than that of most comparable regions in these islands.

In fact, why can we not have a debate about taking ownership of the foreshore? The royalties that accrue from that region for precious metals and other finds do not come to us; they go to London. That is the sort of debate that we should be having, but are not. I will leave my visionary stuff and come back to the reality of today.

It was referred to already, but today was a significant day in economic policy terms. A group of economists, who were very much Ulstermen, came here today. Indeed, those Members who express deep scepticism about all-island

economics should understand that there is a huge difference between all-island economics and all-island politics. I do not know a single businessman in the region who does not favour greater economic integration on this island. In fact, I do not know a single businessman in this region, or a serious economist for that matter, who does not favour the development of an all-island economy, not because it makes political sense, but because it makes economic sense.

Today, six eminent economists professed to us that it was time to reignite the debate about introducing a 12.5% corporation tax, which would harmonise us with the rest of the island. That is a challenging debate, and it comes with a potential economic cost, because, in order to avoid state aid rules, we would have to devise a formula that will ensure that the policy does not result in one-way traffic. We must consider how the money that we would raise through revenue would be compensated for from the block grant. That is a debate that we will not be able to have all year, because we are not dealing with a new Budget that would allow us to have such a debate.

I also want to talk about health, which we have spoken about a lot recently. It has been noted that the Health Minister has yet to go to either the Health Committee or the House with any significant proposals on how he will tackle the pressures that are on him. I have huge sympathy with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, because it is deeply unsatisfactory that there is a Minister in the Executive who controls so much of the Budget, as Mr Attwood pointed out, but is unwilling and unable to admit that, by failing to openly discuss where efficiencies could be found in management and in the senior echelons of his Department and the health trusts, he will preside over stealth cuts in the spring.

There will be stealth cuts to front line services; there will be ward closures; we will see more pressure on carers, which will particularly affect the elderly; and we will see what Age Concern described as a “caring crunch”. That is all because we are failing to be strategic about how we plan services within the very limited resources available to us.

In another document published today — it appears that today was the day for publishing documents — Age Concern raised an issue that is directly relevant to budgetary planning

and to the debate tonight. The document notes that our population is ageing — a statement of the obvious — and points out that there will be a significant increase in the number of people aged 65 and over in Northern Ireland over the next 30 to 40 years. Age Concern reckons that expenditure in supporting and caring for such people will double, and will do so in a much shorter period.

Why are we not having a budgetary debate that recognises that and carries with it the opportunity for bringing a small regional Government to the fore, allowing us to sit down and have an honest debate? We should not be debating, line-by-line, a bunch of programmes that we inherited from the British Government, rebranded into our own and recycled every year to make them look as if they are better than they were last year? Why do we not look at and address the needs of the people who live in this region and the needs of the economy of this region?

Undoubtedly, the duplication of services at a regional level is an issue, and it is fuelled by the division that is inherent in our communities. It is slightly academic as to whether we accept the figures that were bandied about in the infamous Deloitte report that was never quite published but found its way into the public domain. The point is that we still know that the problem exists. I know that the Minister is not entirely blind to the issue; he accepts that there is a debate to be had on it. In the next year, I hope that we are able to see the Department of Finance and Personnel trying to understand the cost of division in the region and ascertaining what steps we should be taking across all Departments to find efficiencies so that we can guarantee that we are not perpetuating a problem that we are determined to end.

7.15 pm

Reference was made earlier to North/South bodies, and Mr Attwood quoted the Minister's remarks from yesterday's Hansard report, in which he said that the North/South bodies were set up simply for political reasons. I am sure that Members across the House know that the tourism sector does not believe Tourism Ireland to be a political body. In fact, I have yet to meet a hotelier who thinks that Tourism Ireland is in any way a political body. It is a central part of the tourism industry's economic future, the core of its business planning and a major part of its recent success.

Moreover, I do not know many business people who consider InterTradelreland to be a political body. In fact, most businesspeople whom I know are very interested — Mr Hamilton referred to the matter yesterday in a number of contributions — in increasing trade across the jurisdictional boundaries on the island and are keen to deepen the level of collective wealth that is accumulated on this island for our mutual benefit. It is well past the time to have debates about “North/Southerly” along political lines.

I am sure that we all share an ambition to make this region work, to make the public finances in this place as efficient as possible and to secure the best possible value for money. However, to make this region work, we must make it work in the context, as John Hewitt the great Ulster Protestant Labour poet would have said, in which this region sits. We must not fail to see the Ulster beneath our feet. However, we must also recognise the island that our Ulster is on and understand that that island is part of an archipelago that is part of a great continent. To ignore that — I made this point yesterday but will make it again — is to ignore the economic and financial opportunities that are available to us all.

I will not speak for too much longer, but I want to make a brief point. I apologise to Mrs McGill, who is valiantly flying the flag for Sinn Féin. It appears that Sinn Féin has left the debate. However, should we really be surprised at that? Outside Dáil Éireann during the Lisbon referendum, Gerry Adams said that Sinn Féin is:

“not interested in managing the economy.”

That is a sad indictment of a senior partner in the Executive, a sad indictment of where our politics is and a sad indictment of the priority that we should put on scrutinising the work of a Minister who has been sitting in the Chamber for about seven hours today.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Member not view Mr Adams’s infamous comments some months ago as, perhaps, more of an embracement of free market economics and of less state interference in the running of people’s lives?

Mr McDevitt: I guess that neither Mr Hamilton nor I can quite figure out why anyone who holds a public office would ever make such remarks, regardless of their political opinion. In the famous words of Conor Cruise O’Brien, it is “GUBU”-esque.

I welcome the investment announced yesterday in broadcasting funds for the Irish language and Ulster Scots. They are important steps and will do quite a bit to stimulate economic activity in this great city of ours. There is quite a vibrant media industry here, which probably stands to benefit from that investment. However, when Irish republicans went to Britain to negotiate a deal, I wish that they had not refined it to such matters. I wish that we had had news of an increase to our block grant, of some acknowledgement of the special circumstances that we face here or of the opportunities that we are unable to realise because of the British Government’s historical underfunding of many aspects of our public services. I wish that side deals did not simply secure £25 million, important as it is, for language but secured something that will change the lives of the many, not just the few.

I will leave it at that. I have sympathy with the Minister in that he is recycling what is now a very old recycled piece of material: perhaps it is because of his new-found commitment to sustainability and the green agenda. I hope that, this time next year, we are debating a new Budget that is not only made in Ulster, as the Minister likes to say, but made for the Northern Ireland of today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the final contributor. I emphasise the word “final” to encourage you all and to rekindle your will to live. I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: This morning, when I read out the speech that had been prepared for me by my departmental officials about the Vote on Account, Supply resolutions, Standing Order 32, the Consolidated Fund, column 1 of schedules 1, 2, 3 and 4, operating and non-operating accruing resources and the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, I thought that the debate would not last too long. Surely there would be no extensive response to all that. How wrong I was.

We have had a wide-ranging debate. Perhaps that was encouraged by the Speaker, who invited Members to talk widely on the issues. I thank all the Members who took part in the debate for the contributions that they made. I mean that genuinely, even though I have had to sit through the debate for seven hours. Despite

Mr Kinahan's contention that we had wasted Hansard's time, the staff's time, our own time and my officials' time, this debate is part of what happens in a democracy: we discuss the issues and deal with the various proposals that are brought before us. We are debating a Bill, the content of which is important, as I said yesterday, to the lives of people in Northern Ireland, because it determines the kinds of services that they are going to get, the services that they got last year and will get next year. Therefore, it is important that we give proper attention to the Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel has apologised to me for not being here. I want to start off by addressing the points that she made. I did not agree with most of her speech; I was happier with the part that was written for her by the Committee Clerk than the Sinn Féin fantasy economics that she came off with later. Nevertheless, she raised a number of points. I thank her for the work that her Committee did and for the way in which it allowed the Bill to go through by accelerated passage. I will also look at the points that she made in relation to her own views.

The Chairperson of the Committee reiterated a theme that was aired continually on that side of the House today: that if, somehow or other, the Budget had been produced in an all-Ireland context, we would have avoided a lot of the difficulties that we have. I made the point yesterday and I will make it again: I do not gloat, nor do I take any satisfaction in the fact that there are economic difficulties in the Irish Republic. What happens in their economy will have an impact on what happens in our economy and vice versa. Equally, there is an even stronger economic pull between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Therefore, we have to recognise the synergy that exists between the two jurisdictions. There is no benefit in gloating when one country or the other hits economic difficulties.

The Chairman of the Committee talked about greater co-operation with the Irish Republic. She wanted more tax-varying powers that would relate more closely to the fiscal policy in the Irish Republic. I suspect that there are many things in the Irish Republic that she would not be all that happy to have replicated here in Northern Ireland.

For example, does she really want the kind of health budget that there is in the Republic, which makes it more difficult for people to gain access to GPs? Is that the kind of thing that she wants? Does she really want to see the swingeing cuts in public sector pay that have been imposed across all levels of the workforce in the Irish Republic? I suspect not, but she did not make that distinction.

I doubt that the increasing burden on the taxpayers in the Irish Republic is something that the Chairperson wants to be replicated here. I also suspect that, given the burden already on the taxpayers in the Republic, they may not welcome having to make a contribution to the subvention that this part of the United Kingdom receives from Westminster. Maybe there is an element of having your cake and eating it, whereby one gets all the good things from that co-operation, and any other money that must be found would come from Britain. I suspect that she did not want to go quite as far as that.

The second matter that the Chairperson mentioned was tax-varying powers. Other Members raised that point, and it is especially relevant today because of the report on corporation tax, which Dr McDonnell made available to me, that has been produced by the Economic Reform Group. The Chairperson talked vaguely about tax-varying powers, as did other Members, including those in the SDLP. None of them, apart from Dr Farry, had the courage to say that, in referring to tax-varying powers, they meant tax-increasing powers. All the Members said how beneficial it would be to have tax-varying powers so that we could lower taxes. Of course, as Mr Weir and others pointed out, tax-varying powers work both ways.

Let us not be under any illusions and let us not send a message from the Assembly that tax-varying powers would mean that everyone would experience the good life and get reductions in their taxes and that businesses would benefit from that. Given some of the wish lists that came later on, I suspect that those tax-varying powers would be tested to the limit in having to increase taxes. That would have an impact on workers in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson also spoke about the review of the Budget process, and she indicated that there had been a promise that the Budget process would be reviewed. As I have said on other occasions, that work will be completed shortly

and should be available as soon as we have finalised the 2010-11 spending plans. There is an important linkage between spending plans and outcomes. At this first stage, it is important that there is clarity as to what the priorities are in the Programme for Government and how they are developed in the Budget process.

The Chairperson of the Committee and others raised the issue of the Barnett formula. There are flaws and weaknesses in the Barnett formula because it relies on only population as a basis for allocating resources. It takes no account of the relative level of need. The Scottish and Welsh Governments, as well as a House of Lords Select Committee, have produced reports indicating that any reform should involve an assessment of relative need. However, and I introduce some caution here, the calculation of relevant need is a subjective assessment. If we used that to replace the current Barnett formula mechanism, there is no guarantee that we would get a more satisfactory solution for Northern Ireland.

Even the Scottish and the Welsh recognised that fact when they indicated that there should be an independent mechanism for dealing with the differences between what Administrations believe that they should receive and what HM Treasury decides that they should receive.

7.30 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel said that the needs base should be determined through local assessment. I cannot envisage a situation in which HM Treasury asks us to identify what we need, we hand it a bill, and then it simply gives us that money. I do not want to be too unkind, because the Chairperson is not here to defend herself. However, in her role as Sinn Féin spokesperson, she expressed unrealistic attitudes and spoke about what I call fantasy economics.

She argued that we should have tax-varying powers to allow us to lower taxes. She wants us to identify our needs and then go to HM Treasury and demand the required funds. She believes that we have a Budget review in which we can simply list all the things that we want, for which someone else will pay the bill. With that kind of economic policy, it is no wonder that Gerry Adams was rejected by people in the Irish Republic when he tried to act as an economic guru during an election campaign.

Mr Shannon talked about the efficiency savings in the health budget. I do not want to go over all the points again. The health budget in Northern Ireland accounts for 48% of the entire Budget. All Departments are committed to that Budget, and no Department can be exempt. Certainly, no Department that takes up almost 50% of the entire Budget can be exempt from efficiency savings. An opportunity still exists to achieve those efficiencies in the health budget.

No Department can claim that it spends every pound effectively. Indeed, the Appleby report indicates that £200 million worth of savings could be generated were we to increase Northern Ireland's productivity level even to the level of England's. Every Minister, including the Health Minister, must consider the opportunities to make significant savings.

Mr McDevitt: We all share the ambition of achieving those efficiencies in the Health Service. However, I am sure that the Minister recognises the importance of protecting front line services. Is he willing to explore the possibility of having a mechanism to ring-fence front line services in a budgetary sense? The Minister could bring that proposal to the House, perhaps in conjunction with the Health Minister. Such a mechanism would allow us to target efficiencies where they need to be targeted outside front line services.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Health Minister said that he was having difficulty in making the required efficiencies. Therefore, in November 2009, I suggested that PEDU could examine how the Health Service might deliver better performance and efficiency. However, the Minister rejected my offer. We are always happy to examine what can be done where Ministers and Departments are struggling, and other offers have been made. Consultants have brought about high levels of savings in hospitals in London without affecting service delivery, but the Health Minister has not taken up that opportunity. Ministers have a responsibility to appear before Committees to examine the work that Committees do and to seek guidance on working within a budget.

I will now deal with Mr McNarry's contribution. Mr McNarry started off very badly this morning. He spoke about the accusation that his party is the grumpy party. He then sought to go out of his way to prove that he is Mr Grumpy by attacking everyone in sight. I will not digress

totally, but this point was made, so it has to be answered. Mr McNarry started off by saying that he was grumpy because £20 million had been got for the Irish language as a side deal at Hillsborough. His accusation was that that was something that the DUP had negotiated with the Government at Hillsborough. He asked why such emphasis had been placed on negotiating a £20 million deal for the Irish language when people required money to heat their homes and when money was required for hospitals. He went through a whole litany of needs.

I want to make it clear that no side deal was negotiated by the DUP with the British Government or the Irish Government for the Irish language. If £20 million was obtained for the Irish language, and if that was a priority that was attached to the negotiations, the Member should at least have had the decency to direct his fire at the party that took that to be a priority, and that is the party opposite. Sinn Féin has to make the argument to its people, because a number of Sinn Féin Members spoke about needing money spent on this, that and the other. They have to explain why £20 million for the Irish language was more important than money for other services.

For Mr McNarry to try to say that that was part of a DUP deal illustrates that he did not approach the debate in a spirit of helpfulness, yet he went further still and sought to create dissent where there was no cause for it. At the end of his contribution, of course, he spoke about wanting to have a better working relationship. Strange way of doing it.

He went on to come out with other fairy tale stuff. He said that the £20,000 that will be spent on advertising the Hillsborough agreement will be a waste of money. Let me make it clear that the Executive have allocated no additional funding in order to advertise the Hillsborough agreement. Surprisingly, he forgot to mention that, after the Belfast Agreement, when his party was the biggest power, it was not £20,000 but hundreds of thousands of pounds that was spent on advertising that deal, from television advertisements to publications that went into every home. Again, a degree of double standard was at work there.

When he did eventually get on to the subject of the Budget, Mr McNarry talked about priority-based budgets. I agree that it is important that the Executive have a clear understanding of

their priorities as part of the budgeting process. Indeed, that was helpful in the Budget review that we undertook. We knew the priorities, so when I interviewed Ministers, we looked at those priorities, and when the Executive made decisions, they concentrated on those parts of the Budget to which they had attached priority.

However, there is one difficulty in determining which services will not be priorities. I listened intently to Mr McNarry, and although he talked about the need for priority-based budgeting and about how it was impossible to budget without that, I did not get an inkling in all the time that he was speaking of what he would make the priorities in the Budget. We simply got throwaway lines.

Mr McNarry mentioned priority-based budgeting for health. However, priority-based budgeting does not mean that this Department or that activity has priority and should be handed a blank cheque so that it can spend money as it wants. That seems to be the infantile view that Mr McNarry holds. He is not here to defend himself, which is a great pity. I would have taken interventions so that he could clarify what he meant, even though he was not prepared to take interventions during his diatribe.

Because an area has priority, one cannot say that how it spends its money should not be questioned; that would totally negate the benefits of priority-based budgeting. Set priorities; but ensure that even the areas prioritised are subject to close examination on how they spend their money.

Mr Hamilton: I listened to the Minister's comments on Mr McNarry's proposal for priority-based budgeting. Did the Minister note, as I did, that in setting out his priorities, Mr McNarry listed health, addressing social need and job creation? Given the vast proportion of the Budget that those areas account for, can the Minister tell the House how much of the Budget would be left from which to take money and reprioritise?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In that case, nearly 70% of the Budget would be a priority, and any reduction would fall on the remaining 30%, which would create great difficulties.

The next point that Mr McNarry made was raised by a number of other Members: the savings that might come from the Civil Service

pay bill in 2010-11. We asked for a study of that suggestion, but it is one of a number of silver bullets that Members offered during the debate: if only we did this or that, we would solve all our problems. Public sector pay is suggested as a remedy to all our problems. Mr McCrea made that point as well.

When the private sector is taking severe hits, we cannot afford to be profligate in the public sector. However, scope is limited, even if the sums involved rise through inflation. The annual increase, in the part of the Civil Service pay bill over which we have direct control, is about £25 million. In the broader context, the Government at Westminster announced that they intend to exercise pay restraint, although we do not know what form that will take or what savings it will make. However, most of those employed in the public sector are affected by national pay agreements; therefore, if there is scope for savings, it will come from what happens nationally rather than locally. Even in the local picture, there are contractual obligations. Contractual obligations add about 2.4% to the Northern Ireland Civil Service pay bill every year, and unless we break those obligations, we will face that pressure annually. Members know that I have not run away from the issue; where we have been able to make reductions on bonuses etc, the work has been done and decisions made.

Mr McNarry and others asked about the effect of a further slowdown in public spending in 2010-11 and beyond. It is difficult to know what the effect will be because, to date, we have not been able to get information from the Treasury. One has only to look at the confusion in both major parties in the United Kingdom to see the problem that we face as a local Administration. On one hand, Alistair Darling says that there must be severe cuts; on the other hand, the Prime Minister says that perhaps the Government can be a bit more lenient. The leader of the Conservative Party says that there will be swingeing cuts, but we are then told that we do not need them. Some say that we need cuts immediately after the election; others that we can wait until the next financial year.

7.45 pm

Against such a background, it is difficult to know where exactly we will be in the next financial year. The best available estimates are that there will be no increase in current spending funding at all — there will be a flat rate — and that

there will be a significant reduction in capital funding. I think that the reduction will be about 6.9%. Ministers should be making preparation for that. Of course, the invest-to-save fund is designed to help them.

Mr McNarry and other Members talked about the inability of the in-year monitoring process to address emerging pressures. In previous years, significant emerging pressures, including water charges, the shortfall in capital receipts and the response to swine flu, were dealt with in the in-year monitoring process. However, it was recognised that pressures were building. For that reason, we have reviewed the Budget and moved away from the level of overcommitment, which stood at £100 million two years ago. It will be reduced to zero this year. That is a recognition that pressures exist and that we cannot depend upon an overcommitment at the end of the year. We cannot hope that some of the anticipated spending will not take place. People have asked what we are doing to plan, and we have responded by reducing the overcommitment to zero.

A number of Members were concerned about the Education Minister's proposals to cut support to prep schools. As many Members pointed out, it appears to be a short-sighted view probably more driven by ideology than economics because £800 per pupil goes to prep schools. Some may argue that not all prep schools would close without that £800 per pupil, but there would be a significant reduction in the numbers going to prep schools and, of course, the cost of their education would fall fully on the state. Some Education Committee members suggested that the ministerial decision could lead to an increase of well over £1,500 per pupil. I have written to the Minister telling her that since I believe this to be a contentious issue, the ministerial code requires her to bring it to the Executive, and I expect her to do so. There is a mechanism to ensure that that will happen, and the issue can also be brought to the House for a cross-community vote.

Mr O'Loan said that this was the wrong Budget; he said that it was not radical and that there were no new priorities in it. He talked about how we had not embraced the changes that were required. He went as far as commending the budget that his party made public in April of last year. I think that it was called 'New Priorities', but I am sure that he will remind me. It is a bit rich for Mr O'Loan to say that this is the wrong

Budget, that it is not radical enough, and that we ought to look to his party for a solution.

Let Members consider how radical his and his party's proposals were. The SDLP's proposed changes to current expenditure equated to less than 1% of the planned spend in current expenditure in 2010-11. That is hardly radical. The proposal did not even address the tough issues such as what should be done about water charges, equal pay or further cuts from the Treasury.

Some of the figures were not even right. According to the SDLP proposals, DSD faced a shortfall. I can understand that they might have got it wrong because they did not have information from Departments. However, I would expect them to at least get the figures right for the Department for Social Development, because the party has the Minister in that Department. Nevertheless, it predicted a shortfall in DSD housing receipts of £200 million. In fact, the figure was closer was to £100 million, so, when it came to it, they could not even get those figures right.

Mr Attwood raised the issue of a women and children's hospital at the Royal site. He suggested that £20 million should be allocated to the project: £10 million each in 2009-2010 and 2010-11. They forgot that about another £300 million was needed. That is the kind of Budget that the SDLP proposes that we should consider. The party advocates a radical approach and claims that it will lead the way. I could go through its suggestions for the Budget a bit further, but I will not, because I am not going to spend as long on Mr O'Loan's submission as he did. However, I will give way because I mentioned him.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for giving way and for the attention that he has given to our document, albeit not with total accuracy in all cases. As I said, we presented a document for discussion. We know that some elements required finessing. We would have welcomed his party and others opening up a debate that allowed us to take what we proposed as valuable starting points, some of which were adopted by his party's Ministers. Had we embarked on the process of using the political resources in the Assembly to address the challenge that confronted us, as we discussed, we would be in a much better place today.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not think that we would be in a much better place had we adopted the inaccurate and inadequate proposals that Mr O'Loan commended at the start of his speech to the Assembly. We must deal with the Budget as presented. I say to him and to the House that the proposals that were presented by the Executive and endorsed by his leader, who is sitting on the Benches behind him, were, as I reminded him earlier, much more radical and probably much more relevant than those that he commended to the House in his speech.

Regardless of that, Mr O'Loan raised a number of points, the first of which was the need for a fundamental reprioritisation of Departments' budgets. He indicated that the Budget does not meet the demands of the economic downturn. One must consider the amount of money in the Budget and the in-year monitoring. I think it was Mr Hamilton who intervened during Mr O'Loan's speech to point out that during the in-year monitoring over the past two years, £800 million was redirected from one form of spend to another, which is fairly radical and reflects the changes. Some of that money went directly to issues that had to be addressed because of the downturn. Therefore, the Budget was fundamentally changed. The in-year monitoring up until now was also subject to much more significant changes than some of those that were suggested by Mr O'Loan.

I am glad that the Member welcomed my proposal to establish the invest to save fund, which has been well received by Departments. I said that, before finalising the Budget in June, I would welcome the Assembly's views on the matter. Nonetheless, although we have only £26 million, Ministers have bid for £89 million, so it is clear that the idea has resonated with them and they recognise its importance.

The Member raised the redistribution of economic activity, particularly with respect to the Bain report. We had a long debate about the Bain report, and I am not going to go over all the issues again. All that I will say is that the Bain report indicated that its proposals were not value for money. Therefore, in a time of economic restraint, we should not go down the route of adopting proposals that the author of the report admitted do not give value for money.

Mr O'Loan talked about the reduction in capital investment. In 2009-2010, the net change in

capital investment is only 1%, compared with the 10% or 15% that the Member suggested. As I pointed out when I spoke about the SDLP's proposals, he is not great with figures. Although we would prefer to have seen capital growth, the reduction amounted to only 1%. Of course, the downturn in the construction industry provides opportunities to achieve better value for money, and, hopefully, that will enable us to deliver more projects. I must also point out — although I do not blame her for it — that the Royal Exchange project, which falls within the Minister for Social Development's remit, is one of the big pressures on capital receipts.

I was interested to hear Mr O'Loan quote extensively from the CBI report into the need for public sector reform. I agree with him; we need to look at different ways of doing things in the public sector. Those are some of the tough choices that we have to make, because we have to reduce the productivity gap between the public sector and the private sector and between the public sector in Northern Ireland and that elsewhere in the United Kingdom. That is why the performance and efficiency delivery unit is there to assist Departments.

As I have said time and again in the House, I am disappointed that Ministers have not taken up the opportunity to look at what PEDU can do in their respective Departments. In my Department, Land and Property Services has faced difficulties. Mr McNarry referred to the problems faced by LPS in collecting arrears, although, during a recession, one must accept that it is more difficult to collect some taxes. I am not satisfied with the service's performance, and we will be looking at how it might improve, so I am not being complacent about the matter. Nevertheless, I would like to think that Ministers would bring PEDU in to look at how their respective Department's performance could improve.

Although Mr O'Loan ducked the issue, another implication of the CBI report into reforming the public sector is the need to go out to market testing, privatisation or the use of the private sector in the public sector — call it what you want. Given that that is not in line with of his party's policy, I was surprised, therefore, that he seemed to embrace some of the CBI's ideas.

8.00 pm

Perhaps he wishes to demur from that — I am happy if he does — but, when he wanted to make the point about the CBI criticising the

Budget, he was happy to read out extracts of the report in support of his arguments. If he has had time to think about it, I am happy to give him the chance to put it on the record, because I would not like him to be wrongly accused on the matter.

Mr O'Loan: I will make three remarks. The Minister referred a couple of times to value for money, and I will ask him and other Members to think when they use that term. We need to think hard about the word "value" and what we actually regard as providing value. That brings us to the comments that I made about the kind of society that we want to achieve, because there is more value in that than can be measured by the slide rule or the calculator.

If the Minister examines the record, he will find that I did not dodge his comment about the CBI report, because he intervened at that point. I addressed the point head on, and, if he looks at the record, he will see that I did not shirk from that and that I am open to any kind of examination of that matter and to a serious examination of our public sector. He said that he was with me on this one, and, if he wishes to start that debate, I assure him that I will be with him on a serious engagement on that issue.

Finally, he offered PEDU as a serious response to the issue of public sector reform. However, we have been told that PEDU has a staff of about four. They are not all full time, and the Minister regrets that the unit is not being given much work to do. Therefore, I have started to build up an image of an office door in some DFP corridor marked "PEDU". There are four people in the office with four desks, and two of those people are not there all the time. They are sitting twiddling their pencils waiting for the phone to ring to invite them to come and have a look at something. That seems to be the level at which PEDU is operating. Therefore, if that is a serious attempt at public sector reform, it leaves something to be desired.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not think that the Member should denigrate the work that PEDU has done. In fact, when I was Minister of the Environment and was having difficulty with the Planning Service and looking at how we could make it more efficient, I was more than happy with PEDU's work. The work was significant, and it was the result of a combination of factors. It is not a case of someone coming in and telling others what to

do; it is a case of people coming in and looking afresh at things and working with others. However, it was significant that, by the end of that year, the targets for all levels of planning applications had been met for the first time. Therefore, let us not denigrate PEDU's work. I do not think that I was offering it as the answer to all public sector reform. Indeed, much more fundamental changes could be made. I have noted what the Member said, and, when he started to intervene, I thought that he was going to change his earlier stance. Clearly, however, he has not, and I am pleased to hear that.

The Member and a number of other SDLP and Sinn Féin Members made the point about greater co-operation with the Irish Republic and the fact that the Irish Republic was a master of its own fate. They asked whether we should not desire that independence as opposed to a lot of economic decisions that have impacted on us being made at Westminster. Of course, the truth of the matter is that the Irish Republic is not a master of its own fate; it has been constrained by being a member of the euro zone. Indeed, some of the tough decisions that the Irish Republic had to make in its Budget were made because of the threat of having its bond credit rating reduced. Therefore, its being a stand-alone country does not mean that it is master of its own fate. Equally, we must recognise the strength of the United Kingdom. As a committed unionist, I would say that, but the strength of the United Kingdom is important to us, especially when there are global economic forces that a small place such as Northern Ireland could not resist by itself.

The Member also, quite rightly, raised the issue of asset management. I was actually getting a bit worried because I found myself agreeing more and more with his comments. He talked about having to "sweat" assets. Such phrases are lovely until one discovers what they mean. Sweating public sector assets has involved such measures as car parking charges at hospitals and more charging for groups who wish to use school premises in the evenings, which the Member mentioned. He also talked about sweating the assets of schools and hospitals. Let us be clear what is meant by that. Members talked about tough choices. If the Assembly needs to discuss such measures, let them be discussed frankly and openly. All I am trying to do is delve in behind words that sound good when they are thrown out in the public domain

and discover what they actually mean for the people who will be affected by such decisions.

The Member also raised the issue of NAMA. I will be meeting Minister Lenihan tomorrow. I have noted people's concerns about NAMA. I have also spoken to the Institute of Directors and to a number of other people in Northern Ireland. They have raised concerns. The issue will have an impact in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I look forward to continued co-operation with the Finance Minister in the Republic. There is no doubt that people will ask questions in the House after that meeting. I am more than happy to report back on how I get on with the Minister on that issue. He has assured me that we will co-operate. I am quite happy to do so.

Mr O'Loan also mentioned the boiler scrappage scheme. As far as that is concerned, there was a Barnett consequential of £700,000. Of course, the Assembly has the warm homes scheme, which targets resources — particularly for new boilers and completely new heating systems — on households on the basis of need. The Member will accept that, if the Assembly receives a Barnett consequential, it should not simply spend it as it has been spent at Westminster. We make independent decisions in Northern Ireland. It is not as though there are no opportunities for people who have difficulties with their heating system. It is better that they are directed to people who are in most need, as is the case through the warm homes scheme.

As far as Mr Farry is concerned —

Mr Attwood: I thought that, as the Minister was replying to Mr O'Loan's remarks, it was best that the conversation was between him and Mr O'Loan. However, it is important to correct a number of matters.

The first concerns a figure that the Minister relied on in his contribution. He said that the loss of capital assets in DSD is £100 million. Will he confirm that there is a difference of view between DFP and DSD on that matter? The view of DSD, which has custody of the assets, is that the loss is, in fact, £200 million. It is not fair or balanced to tell the House that the figure is £100 million when the Minister knows that there is a conflict of opinion between his officials and those in DSD. Before the debate proceeds, I ask him to correct that matter in order to ensure that the full picture about what he believes and what DSD believes is on public record.

The second matter is that, when the SDLP outlined its proposals for public assets, it was careful about the assets of which it spoke. In its document entitled 'New Priorities in Difficult Times', which was published in April 2009, the party proposed the sale of public assets such as car parks. Is there not an argument for the sale of certain car parks in the North? Although they are worth less now than they used to be, given that money from their sale would be invested in public contracts that also cost less than they once did, the gain and loss would probably cancel each other out. Is there not an argument, as the SDLP has pointed out, that discreet and discerning sale of public assets is actually a good and proper measure to deal with some of the current Budget shortfalls?

Although the Minister may want to beat up on the SDLP's document that was produced last April, he knows and I know that behind the scenes his party and DFP realise that as an opening proposal it stacked up on a lot of fronts. In private, the DUP was saying that at least somebody was trying to get their head around the financial situation in the North in a time of stress. The Minister should be straight with the House and say to Members that, for all the beating-up of what he thinks are weaknesses in the SDLP proposals, behind the scenes DFP and the DUP realise that there is a lot of argument in what the SDLP outlined.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will not concede the Member's last point. The document was not radical or accurate, and the figures that were presented were incorrect. The proposals also ignored a range of big pressures that we are facing, and it ducked the decisions on the big pressures that were facing the Executive. Therefore, I will not accept that, privately or publicly, we felt that there was any value in the document that was produced.

I have told Ministers that we should sell assets that can be sold in situations in which we can get value for money for them. Even on occasions when, perhaps, we will not realise what we assume to be the full market value, we should sell, because that money may well enable us to carry out lower-priced contracts. That message has gone out time and time again.

The Budget proposal regarding the shortfall in the receipts in DSD was agreed by the Executive. Therefore, it is not my position nor that of DFP or DSD; it is the Executive's position,

and the Minister for Social Development agreed that Budget when it was before the Executive. On all those counts, I will not concede that there is a difference.

Mr Farry is not in the Chamber. I always find his contributions to be thoughtful and engaging. At least, he shows a bit more political courage than some other Members. When he says that he believes that something should be done, regardless of how unpopular it is, he will defend his position. He raised a number of issues, including the funding for health. He argued that health should not be exempt from efficiency savings, as did other Members. I have emphasised that time and time again. Despite what Mr Kinahan said, no health budget has been protected anywhere in the United Kingdom or in the Irish Republic. It is accepted that, since health takes up such a big proportion of the Budget, it cannot be ignored. If there are efficiencies to be made, they should be made.

Mr Farry also raised the issue of rates bills and asked whether the freezing of the regional rate was a good thing. I know that tax-varying powers and varying taxes have been debated, but I think that it is only Mr Farry who has been honest enough to say that having those powers would mean that we should increase some taxes. Remember the furore that there was under direct rule, when the regional rate was increased by 8% per annum. If Members think back to that time, they will understand that the freezing or unfreezing of the regional rate or increasing revenue through the imposition of local taxes are not popular options. It might be easy to discuss such matters in a Chamber such as this or at a Committee, but they will not be popular with the public.

8.15 pm

If we want public services, we must pay for them. If we have an honest case to make for improved public services, we should argue that we will not get them for nothing. It is difficult to do that if it is believed and there is still substantial evidence that we do not use the money that we have effectively. That is what I say to Mr Farry and those who think like him. Only in that context will it be possible for us to argue that we should increase revenue by increasing taxes.

Mr Farry also talked about the costs of division and the invest to save fund. I note that no Department has put forward an invest to save

proposition to deal with the cost of division. Perhaps that says something about what Committees — what Alliance Party Committee members — ought to be saying to Ministers. I have made my position clear: if money that is spent unnecessarily because of division in our society can be saved, I will tell Ministers to make the changes to avoid spending that money. I have no ideological opposition to that, but we must recognise that some of the costs of division will not be eradicated easily. In some cases, it is more about social and economic issues; in others, divisions are so deeply seated that it will not be possible to deal with them quickly.

One issue that has been talked about time and time again is the extra expenditure per head on education in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party argues all the time that significant savings could be made in education by doing away with the dual school system — or the four-school system that we have now in Northern Ireland. However, a significant part of that expenditure is due to the fact that we have more people of school age in Northern Ireland rather than simply the costs of having separate systems. I will be saying to the Minister of Education that there are situations where it is feasible to have only one school in an area. Why would we duplicate or triplicate the number of schools? We will start to move towards that situation with local discussions on schools.

Mr Farry also talked about benchmarking public expenditure so that we had comparisons. It is right to compare with other parts of the United Kingdom, and, when we do, we find that it does not always come out well for us. To go back to the Barnett consequentials, in some cases we would find it difficult to argue why spending is 22% higher per head of population in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK, why we have 5% more to spend on health, 8% more to spend on education and 34% more for economic affairs. However, at least those benchmarks give us something to look at.

The question of corporation tax was raised by a number of Members. The recommendations in today's report from the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group should be treated with considerable caution. There is a simplistic analysis that could have a serious negative effect on the funding for Northern Ireland if the Government sought to implement the report's proposals here. The report does not suggest what part of the Executive's funding should be

cut, and it also understates the fact that any additional future corporation tax profits generated would go to HMRC in London. It ignores what other parts of the UK are likely to do; I cannot imagine Scotland or Wales accepting such a proposal. We must recognise that, at least initially, the proposal will take money from the public sector and give it to shareholders. Any reduction in corporation tax will come off public spending in Northern Ireland and, initially, will go to the shareholders in companies that are affected by the retained profits.

We have been told that having a differential rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland could generate 90,000 jobs over a 20-year period. However, there are some facts that we must tease out and have a proper discussion about before we take what appears to be an attractive route. Mr Farry also raised the issue of household bills and the fact that household taxation in Northern Ireland is lower than in other parts of the United Kingdom, factors that might come back to bite us if the Barnett formula was reopened.

Mr Bell drew attention to the good work that the Executive have done for the people of Northern Ireland and the effect that that work has had in his own constituency of Strangford. We must remember that the debate is actually about how money has been spent and the impact that that has had.

Mr McLaughlin, who is not in his place —

Mr McCartney: I note that the only person the Minister has been able to rebut is Mr O'Loan. Given the length of time that Members have been in the Chamber, maybe the Minister will consider writing to those who did not come in to listen to his rebuttals and address only those who are in the Chamber. Furthermore, the suggestion was made that PEDU is not very busy at present. Maybe it could be employed in creating efficiencies in the writing of speeches and listening to what the Minister has to say.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I said at the start that, as I have had to sit and listen to people for seven hours, I would be indulging myself by replying to them and putting my comments on the record. However, I will rush through my replies, because many of the later Members have made some of the points.

Mr McLaughlin talked about the level of efficiencies and the savings that would impact

on the block grant. I remind Mr McLaughlin that efficiencies are issues for individual Ministers, and it is up to Committees to ensure that Ministers are driven to make those efficiencies.

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

Mr McLaughlin also mentioned the Barnett formula, and I have already commented on that. I am reluctant to reopen the Barnett formula, for all of the reasons that I have given: we have higher spending per head; needs assessments are very subjective; the Treasury will look at the level of taxation that we impose in Northern Ireland; and we may not get the result we want.

Mr Ross discussed the capital receipts shortfall, and I think that I have already covered that in relation to DSD during my response. Mr Ross also talked about the reduction in capital spending for education, and there are challenges in that area. However, as mentioned by several Members, capital spending in education, even with the reductions, will be 32% higher next year than it was in the fiscal year before the Assembly came into being. There has been a considerable increase in the capital budget of that Department.

Mr Ross also mentioned Nortel in his own constituency, and having spoken to Arlene Foster I know that DETI is working to retain the jobs in that company. As for the e-PIC system, additional money has been made available so that that system can go online. Other Members also mentioned that system, and there will always be teething problems with all new computer systems. The system is also over-budget and well behind schedule, but once it goes online it will help to improve the planning system.

Mr Ross also mentioned the efficiencies in North/South bodies. I do not make any distinction between North/South bodies and the Northern Ireland Departments, nor do I particularly zone in on them. However, the bodies should be subject to the same efficiencies as the Northern Ireland Departments, and the Ministers in the Irish Republic share that view. It is not a political issue, but, when public money is being spent, we must ensure that it is spent in the best possible way and that we achieve the best value for money.

Mr Basil McCrea made a fairly rambling speech. There was an irony in that speech, because he said that the Member for Strangford Mr Ross had not addressed the issues and had little of substance to say, but then after seven

minutes the Deputy Speaker had to pull him up for not speaking on the subject. There was a certain irony in that, which he seemed to miss. He spoke about the need to take tough decisions, but I did not hear one tough decision mentioned during his speech. There were no firm proposals. I still do not know whether he wants public sector pay cuts or water charges introduced or in what Departments he wants to see reductions made. It is a pity he is not here, because I would let him intervene. He talked about the shortfall in education, but the only thing he seemed to say was that more money was needed for that. There was good rhetoric at the beginning of his speech about the need to make tough choices, but I did not hear any tough choices mentioned.

The Member also spoke about the public relations spin. Given that a Minister from his party is the most eager advocate not only of opposing decisions in the Assembly but of making sure that he gets plenty of publicity for opposing those decisions, it seems a bit strange that he should talk about that. He also talked about public sector pay, which I have already addressed. I listened to what Mr McCrea said about tough decisions being made, but he is at the head of almost every protest that is held outside this Building about cuts; he acts as a spokesman for those protests. There is an irony in the way that Members say one thing in here which does not seem to relate to the decisions that they make outside.

The Member also mentioned the education budget. I have pointed out that the education budget will actually have more money in it next year than it had last year. It has not gone up in line with inflation, but it has increased. Had he looked at the figures in the spending plans, he would have seen that, last year, current spending on education amounted to £1,879.4 million, and this year it will be £1,909.4 million — that is an increase of 1.6 %. I accept that it is not an increase in line with inflation. There is a reduction in capital funding for education, and he asked whether the Minister had agreed with that. I point out that everybody in the Executive agreed to the Budget; it has been agreed by the Ministers. Dominic Bradley also mentioned the Budget shortfall. I point again to the figures that I have just given.

Mr Hamilton raised the issue of social housing. We are on target to meet the social and affordable housing targets of — I think that I

gave the figure yesterday — 1,750 houses to be built this year. I commend the Minister for Social Development on that achievement. She will accept that, as a result of Executive decisions, her budget has been financed in such a way that she has been able to produce those houses.

Mr Savage raised the issue of the review of the 2011 spending plans and asked whether we would see a repeat of those. I can assure the Member that those plans will not be repeated at the same time next year, because, unfortunately, we do not have any plans in place yet, and we are not in a position to do so because we do not know what the funding from Westminster will be.

Mr Weir spoke about the reduced underspends and improved financial management. I have already mentioned the way in which that has impacted on the Budget, in that we have not been able to have the same amount of money for in-year monitoring. However, with the level of underspend being reduced to zero next year there should be some opportunity for in-year monitoring to look at that.

Mr Weir also talked about the Invest to Save fund. I have already mentioned how popular that is and the number of bids that we have had for it.

8.30 pm

Mr McGlone raised the issue of modulation match funding. That was put in place prior to the imposition of the end-year flexibility (EYF) restrictions by Her Majesty's Treasury. When EYF was restricted, it removed the automatic access to funding that was held in relation to modulation match funding. A bid must now be made every year, and DFP will discuss access to that fund with DARD annually. We have to do that annually because EYF is now restricted.

Mr McGlone also raised the issue of the sale of land at Crossnacreevy. The fact that the envisaged capital receipt of £200 million could not be realised has contributed to our capital difficulties. I understand that DARD is producing an estate strategy, which it aims to complete this year. That should enable DARD to look, at least, at the investment opportunities that are available, the opportunities for rationalisation and the options for disposal.

Mr Storey talked about the education budget, which I have already dealt with.

Mr McGlone talked about DARD's invest to save proposals. DARD has put forward three

invest to save proposals. One is for better land management to reduce the risk of CAP disallowance, which is a big factor. The other two proposals are for a badger-prevalence study in relation to bovine TB and the relocation of the agriculture college. All of those proposals are being considered.

Mr Savage raised the issue of DARD savings. I think that he was referring to DARD's savings in this year's Budget of £9.7 million, £6.3 million of which will come from current investment and £3.4 million from capital investment. The Member asked whether the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development had agreed to those savings. They were part of the Executive's proposals, and the Minister was present and agreed to them.

Mr McDonnell raised a number of issues. I was disappointed in his speech, because he is usually very thoughtful, but all I got was a list of things with which we should help. He said that a Budget should be designed to help the economy, and then he gave me a list of things that he wanted. He wanted more schools, help for the economy, more social housing, reduced corporation tax and a balancing of the books so that there could be seedcorn for research and development. That is all very well, but he did not say where the money would come from.

In fact, he was not very accurate on the subject of funding for research and development, because the Executive have emphasised the growth of a dynamic economy and an economy that emphasises well-paid jobs. Had he looked at the additional funding that is being allocated for innovation projects during the Budget process, he would have seen that an additional £90 million has been allocated to research and development for those innovative projects. That includes £45.4 million for research and innovation capacity and £14.5 million for innovation stimulation. That funding will complement the EU's competitive programme, which has allocated some £140 million for innovation.

Mr Kinahan was disappointed in the standard of the debate. All I can say about Mr Kinahan's speech is that at least it was brief. I was a bit disappointed in the standard of his response. He criticised Members for petty points-scoring and for not having anything new to say, and he then proceeded to attack Members from my party and said that the debate was one of self-congratulation. He talked about the functions

of the Assembly and the time that was wasted in attacking one another. Towards the end, he said that he wanted more money to be spent on roads and that hard choices had to be made on water charging, although I do not know which side of that hard choice he falls on. He said that the ePIC system for planning was not a good idea. That was a wee bit disappointing.

Mr Gallagher raised the issue of roads maintenance. He asked what the cost of the water subsidy will be for next year: it will be £213 million. The roads budget will increase by 20·9%, but the way that that is allocated is up to the Minister for Regional Development. Whether Mr Gallagher can persuade that Minister to spend more of that money in the west of Northern Ireland or elsewhere is his responsibility. He also raised the issue of Omagh hospital. My information is that the hospital is going ahead and that the Health Minister is committed to providing an enhanced hospital for people in the Omagh area. As far as I am aware, the Western Health and Social Care Trust has reviewed the business case, including the procurement route, and has submitted a revised business case for the new Omagh hospital to the Department of Health.

Mr Gallagher also raised the issue of North/South structures. This is the kind of thing that brings the Assembly into great disrepute. He did not use the term “you lot”, but he said that if unionists want to have their east-west structures, nationalists must have their North/South structures. If that is the only reason for having North/Structures — you lot get something, so we have to have something — it is not a good rationale. I must point out that the North/South structures cost significantly more than the east-west structures. I have made it quite clear that I would prefer it if business was done in a businesslike way between Ministers so that we did not have to set up all those costly structures.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister will agree that what Mr Gallagher actually said was that those structures reflect the relationships that are central to the essence of this very House. We have structures that reflect east-west relationships and North/South relationships, and those structures also tend to reflect the respective national identities. I am sure that the Minister will accept that that is what Mr Gallagher meant and that that is the spirit in which his remarks were made.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not think that Mr Gallagher said it quite as eloquently as that. Perhaps the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone would have liked to have said it like that, but he did not actually do that. I think that the record will show that what Mr Gallagher said was more along the lines that I have suggested. My point is that I do not believe that, in many cases, business needs to be done through those structures, regardless of whether they are east-west structures or North/South structures. Business can be done in other ways that are far more flexible and effective and far less costly.

Mr Attwood raised the issue of the police budget, but since that has nothing to do with this Budget, I am not going to say anything about it. He also asked whether there are plans to change the location of the proposed children's hospital. I do not know the answer to that. As far as I understand, the Health Minister is still committed to that. However, I would have thought that having a hospital built was more important than where it was located. As I say, I have received no indication of the current thinking on that.

Mr McDevitt, who came in at the tail end of the debate, asked me why I was not having a debate on visionary issues such as home insulation — I thought that we were doing that in the warm homes scheme, so perhaps he should talk to his Minister about that — the issue of renewables, and the foreshore, although I was not quite clear what he meant by that. I am not responsible for that; I am not the Business Committee. This debate is about the Budget Bill, and that is what we are discussing at present. I am sure that the Member will have ample opportunity to discuss all those visionary issues.

Mr McDevitt: The point that I clearly failed to make was that there are other obvious revenue-raising mechanisms available to the Executive and the Assembly under the devolved powers but which are simply not being used.

Whether it is looking at alternative means of funding insulation programmes or micro-renewable projects, or looking at how we realise the value of the resources beneath our feet, such things could bring revenue into the region and into the coffers of the Minister of Finance. That is revenue which, I presume, he would be happy to receive. Those are the sort of things that I never see reflected in the

Budget. It is the job of the Minister of Finance to show leadership on those issues, and to be willing to be brave and make some interesting suggestions about ways in which we can raise revenue without having to put taxes up.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me answer the Member's point.

Of course those issues are in the Budget. Home insulation has been going on for some time, through the warm homes scheme, and is something that we spend considerable money on. That money comes from various sources of revenue, including a tax on property — the regional rate. If the Member wishes to raise those kinds of issues, there are ample opportunities for him to do so. He can bring along the relevant Minister who can see how that might be included in the programme. A lot of the other points that the Member raised have already been discussed.

I know that the Member wants to project an image of not being steeped in the traditions of the past and of being a new kid on the block.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a minute; I want to finish my point.

As I listened to the Member, I thought that he really has not got out of the SDLP mode. Let me give an example. He quoted the Minister of Finance from two years ago, but, when it came to it, he could not bring himself to say the quote, even though it would have been no reflection on him at all. Peter Robinson said that he wanted a Budget that was made in Ulster for the people of Northern Ireland. The Member could not even bring himself to say the words, "Northern Ireland". The record will show that he talked about "the North".

When it came to his interpretation of that, he said that we should not be blinded by our political prejudices. He said that everyone that he talked to was quite happy with Tourism Ireland and InterTradeIreland. I sat on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster when it took evidence on tourism, and one of the things that came through, even from people who were making a political point, was that Tourism Ireland very often ignored Northern Ireland, even in its publicity materials. There was real anger about the amount of

money that was spent on that. The Member may see things through the eyes of someone who cannot bring himself to say "Northern Ireland" and who sees cross-border bodies as a wonderful thing. However, I want him to know that the prejudice that he believes we, on the unionist Benches, have, is shared, whether he realises it, by him. Not everyone has a rosy picture of how worthwhile North/South bodies are or how well they serve people in Northern Ireland. I recognise that those bodies are there and that we have to work with them. However, I also recognise their deficiencies and some of the things that need to be done to deal with those deficiencies.

I have gone through nearly all the points that I wanted to cover. In conclusion —

Mr O'Loan: It has just occurred to me that the £26 million that the Minister is putting into the Invest to Save fund is the very sum that was involved in the Northern Bank robbery three years ago. I wonder whether, during the recent negotiations, that money came to light.
[Laughter.]

8.45 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It was not suggested by one of the Sinn Féin Members. If it had been, I may have shared the Member's suspicions. However, at this late hour, I will leave it at that.

In conclusion, the Bill brings to a close the financial year 2009-2010, which, as Members said, has been challenging. That was the year in which we were supposed to fall into the black hole. I was very pleased that the black hole was not mentioned in the whole debate, apart from once by one of my colleagues. Here we are at the conclusion of that financial year, with public services delivered and the public finances in balance.

The Bill also makes provisions for the —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member probably wants to mention the black hole, and I do not want to disappoint him, so I will give way to him.

Mr B McCrea: That is very kind. Why is the Minister so pleased that the black hole was not mentioned? Is it because he has filled it in, or is it because we were wrong to mention it? What

gives him that good humour to his step? Why is he so happy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am pleased that, after months of trying to persuade Ulster Unionist Members that there was no black hole, they appear to be satisfied, because they have not even bothered to raise it. I am pleased that my persistence has paid off.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes, I will.

Mr T Clarke: At last.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Having not contributed to the debate all day, the Member now wants to get his name on the record. *[Laughter.]*

Mr T Clarke: Like other Members, I watched most of the debate on the monitor in my room. *[Laughter.]* Except when I was in the canteen.

The Minister said that he has not heard much about the black hole. He did not pick up on Mr McDevitt's mention of the Tellus project that flew over Northern Ireland. How will he square that with his colleague from South Antrim if there is ever a suggestion that a black hole of lignite is going to be dug again in Crumlin?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have no answer to that. It was a fairly cheap shot just to get on the record. *[Laughter.]* Does the Member really expect us to believe that he is so sad that he sat watching the debate on his monitor? If I was him, I would not want that put on the record.

The Bill makes provision for the early months of 2010-11. The Assembly is well aware of the issues that we face in that year. Those issues were discussed during the Committee's take-note debate in the House, and they will be agreed before the beginning of the new financial year.

As we enter 2010-11, one thing that we can be sure of is that there will not be any decline in the demand for public services or for public funding. Such demand will continue to drive the efficient delivery of services and greater level of value for taxpayers. I look forward to the delivery of an ambitious infrastructure programme — new hospitals, schools, colleges, roads, water infrastructure and housing — and its positive spin-off for our construction industry in these difficult times. I look forward to providing

practical support to local businesses and the local community and to responding to the needs of our community and the most vulnerable in our society. On that note, I ask the House to support the Bill.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

*That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill
[NIA 8/09] be agreed.*

Executive Committee Business

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Social Development, Ms Margaret Ritchie, to move the Consideration Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

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

Members will see that there is a single group of amendments, and therefore we will debate all the Bill's amendments in that group. The amendments deal with technical amendments to housing legislation in areas including homelessness, introductory tenancies and houses in multiple occupation.

I remind Members who intend to speak that they should address each amendment in which they are interested, as the issues are to be dealt with in a single debate. Once the debate has been completed, any subsequent amendments will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on clause stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clause 1 (Homelessness strategy)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 2, line 4, at end insert “() district councils;”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In page 2, line 9, at end insert

“() the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety;”. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

No 3: In clause 2, page 4, line 4, at end insert

“(4) In relation to the form and content of advice under paragraph (1) the Executive shall have regard to any guidance issued by the Department.” — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

No 4: In clause 5, page 5, line 14, leave out “21” and insert “28”. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

No 5: In clause 5, page 6, line 19, leave out “21” and insert “28”. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

No 6: In clause 9, page 13, line 10, at end insert

“(3A) In Article 148(3)(b) (orders and regulations) after the word ‘regulations’ insert ‘(other than regulations under Article 19A(3)).’” — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

No 7: In clause 14, page 14, line 27, leave out from beginning to “Article” in line 29 and insert

“at the end add ‘and for that purpose’. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

No 8: After clause 16, insert the following new clause

*“Amendment of Article 55 of the Order of 2006
16A. In Article 55 of the Order of 2006 (review of registered rents) at the end add—
‘(8) An order under paragraph (5) shall be subject to negative resolution.’” — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]*

The Minister for Social Development: Given the relatively small number of amendments, it is helpful that they will be dealt with as a single group, as Mr Deputy Speaker explained.

At the outset, I should explain that all the Government amendments were discussed in some detail during the Committee for Social Development's clause-by-clause scrutiny. I am pleased that the Committee was able to reach consensus on the amendments, and I thank its Chairperson and members for their constructive scrutiny of the Bill.

There are eight Government amendments. Amendment No 1 to clause 1 will add district councils to the list of bodies that are required to take account of the Housing Executive's homelessness strategy in the exercise of their functions. That proposal originates with the Social Development Committee, which highlighted the increasing involvement of councils in issues that relate to social well-being.

Similarly, amendment No 2 to clause 1 will add the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to the list of bodies that are required to take account of the Housing Executive's homelessness strategy. I

have tabled that amendment because DHSSPS has responsibilities in areas that have a direct connection to homelessness. Amendment No 3 to clause 2 will enable my Department to prescribe the type of advice and information about homelessness that is to be provided by, or on behalf of, the Housing Executive. The Social Development Committee asked for that amendment, which will bring clause 2 more closely into line with similar provision in England, Scotland and Wales.

Amendment No 4 to clause 5 will extend the time limit for requesting a review of a Housing Executive decision on an application for homelessness assistance from 21 days, as currently proposed, to 28 days. The Social Development Committee asked for that amendment because a 28-day period is more consistent with housing benefit rules. Similarly, amendment No 5 to clause 5 will extend to 28 days the time limit for appealing to the County Court against the outcome of a review of the homelessness decision.

Amendment No 6 to clause 9 will provide that the regulations that prescribe the form of notice that is to be served on tenants where a landlord has entered an abandoned introductory tenancy and wishes to take possession of the dwelling house should be subject to the negative resolution procedure. Although it is not usual for Assembly controls to apply to regulations that do no more than prescribe the layout of a form or notice, the Social Development Committee asked for that amendment as it wishes to have an opportunity to consider in some detail the Housing Executive's procedures for dealing with abandoned tenancies.

Amendment No 7 to clause 14 will provide that the clause no longer seeks to amend the existing definition of a house in multiple occupation. However, the proposal in that clause to extend the meaning of "family" for the purposes of the definition of a house in multiple occupation (HMO) to include uncle, aunt, nephew and niece will be unchanged. The Social Development Committee expressed concern that the Housing Executive's powers to deal with overcrowded accommodation operate only in the context of houses in multiple occupation, and I agreed to the amendment because clause 14, as drafted, could limit the Housing Executive's ability to deal with overcrowding.

Members may recall that it was originally proposed to amend the definition of a house in multiple occupation because of a legal decision that the existing definition fails to take account of the fact that an extended family normally forms a single household. I am satisfied that clause 14, as amended, will go some way to addressing the court's concerns.

Amendment No 8, which takes the form of a new clause 16A, would add a new paragraph to article 55 of the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to provide that statutory rules providing for the increase of registered rents are subject to the negative resolution procedure in the Assembly. I agreed to that amendment as a consequence of the Examiner of Statutory Rules alerting me to the fact that such Orders are not currently subject to any form of Assembly control.

That concludes my commentary on the Government amendments.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I thank the Minister for her explanation of the amendments to the Housing (Amendment) Bill. I also thank her and her Department for their co-operation and assistance during the Committee Stage of the Bill. Members were greatly encouraged by the positive and helpful approach of the departmental officials. Consequently, the Committee is confident that the Bill and the anticipated heavy legislative programme for next year will be effectively and usefully managed by the Department and the Committee.

The Committee for Social Development undertook a detailed and extensive review of the clauses of the Housing (Amendment) Bill. In my remarks as Chairperson, I will try to reflect the Committee's views on the main issues in the Bill. As the Minister said, the Bill is designed to enhance the legislative framework for a wide range of housing matters, from homelessness and HMOs to housing associations and introductory tenancies.

In its deliberations, the Committee agreed that, although the legislative changes and technical clarifications were generally welcome, members had concerns about some crucial issues. Members also pushed the Department to explore areas that could well be described as being on the limits of the Assembly's legislative competence. However, members were generally content to receive assurances and explanations

on those matters, some of which I want to touch on later.

The requirement for the Housing Executive to produce a homelessness strategy as outlined in clause 1 was welcomed unanimously by witnesses to the Committee and Committee members alike. Although members were happy to have such a requirement in the Bill, the Committee sought assurances that it was a duty that the Housing Executive must undertake and not a power that it could choose whether to exercise. Consequently, members seriously considered amendments that would set out such an assurance. Following representations from the Department, members agreed to forgo any such amendments at Consideration Stage on the understanding that the Minister would clearly set out why the Bill must be worded as it is currently and how that current wording will ensure that the requirement to produce a homelessness strategy is an unavoidable duty. Therefore, I humbly request that the Minister sets out the Department's reasoning on that matter.

In its deliberations on clause 1 the Committee considered which organisations should be required to take the homelessness strategy into account in the exercising of their functions. The Committee looked carefully at the Department's 'Including the Homeless' strategy, which sets out a wide-ranging programme that includes health and education measures and a large number of improvement actions that will affect many vulnerable groups. Consequently, the Committee felt that the list of organisations that are required to take account of the new homelessness strategy must necessarily be a long list and must certainly include district councils, particularly given their expanding role in enforcing housing standards. The Committee was, therefore, happy that the Department brought forward amendments in that regard and is content to give its support to those amendments.

Strategies are all very well, as we know, but it is on the delivery of such strategies that the Assembly and the Executive will be judged. To facilitate transparent review of the delivery of the homelessness strategy, the Committee sought and received assurances that the Housing Executive's management statement will be amended to require an annual report to be produced on the progress of the homelessness strategy by the Housing Executive and related organisations.

Clauses 2 and 4 of the Bill deal with homelessness advice provision. Evidence presented to the Committee by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Housing Rights Service emphasised the vital nature of advice for the homeless and of preventative advice for tenants and homeowners before they lose their homes. It is only through preventative advice and other early action that the rising tide of homelessness can be stemmed. The Committee was again, therefore, pleased that the Department agreed to amend the Bill to require the Housing Executive to consider departmental guidance in the development of homelessness advice. The Committee also accepted assurances that advice would comply with plain English standards and would be available in other languages and alternative formats.

The Committee looks forward to reviewing departmental guidance that will set out minimum standards for the advice that is to be provided.

It is expected that the Committee's review of homelessness advice standards will be informed by evidence from stakeholder organisations to ensure that the correct advice is delivered in the appropriate format. The Committee is confident that it will receive full co-operation from the Department in the development of those advice standards.

9.00 pm

Clause 5 deals with the review of decisions relating to homelessness. Any review process must have certain elements built into it. Appellants must be made aware of their rights, have access to representation and have sufficient time to make an appeal. The process must comply with the highest standards of probity and transparency. As I said, the Committee looks forward to a review of guidance that will set out minimum standards for homelessness advice and for the review process relating to decision-making. That will include guarantees about appellants' rights and the conduct of such reviews.

The Committee received evidence from witnesses that suggested that the timescale for requesting a review of a homelessness decision should be increased to bring it in line with existing practice in the Social Security Agency. I am pleased to say that the Department adopted the Committee's suggestion and developed an amendment that increases the period during which a review can be sought from 21 days to 28 days.

Clause 9 deals with the abandonment of introductory social tenancies. The Committee agreed that the repossession of an apparently abandoned tenancy can be contentious. Therefore, it is important for tenants to be in no doubt about the consequences of abandonment and about their associated rights. The Committee proposed that Assembly procedure be added to the prescription of the form of that type of landlord's notice. On behalf of the Committee, I commend the Department for agreeing to adopt our proposals by tabling the appropriate amendment to clause 9.

The Housing (Amendment) Bill, specifically clause 10, deals with some aspects of how the challenge of antisocial behaviour in social tenancies can be dealt with. Members of the Committee raised several concerns. Nearly all members referred to concerns about antisocial behaviour in their constituencies. Some were keen to discuss those issues, including the need for social landlords to have a duty of care for existing tenants; improving the sharing of information among social landlords; withholding transfers from tenants who have been sanctioned for antisocial behaviour; and the provision of better guidance on the management of antisocial behaviour issues for social landlords.

The Committee looks forward to the Minister's next housing Bill, which will go some way to addressing members' concerns in that regard. However, it is hoped that the Minister will use the debate to provide further assurances to the Committee that those issues will be dealt with in forthcoming legislation. In particular, members would value clarification on the timeline for any modernisation of the common housing selection scheme.

The Committee also accepted assurances that the 'Housing Association Guide' would be amended to require the publication of antisocial behaviour policies and procedures by all social landlords. It is hoped that that will mark the beginning of a useful debate on an alignment between Housing Executive and housing association tenures. The Committee will value any commentary from the Minister on her plans for the alignment of tenancy terms for all social tenants and other issues relating to the common housing selection scheme.

Clause 12 deals with the membership of the Housing Executive board. Members commented on the need to enhance the

democratic accountability of that important public body. Members welcomed the clause, as it increases the Northern Ireland Housing Council's representation. However, members also called for the Housing Executive board to include a tenancy advocate. The Committee accepted assurances from the Department that it would strive, within the rigours of the public appointment process, to encourage applications to the board from tenancy advocates.

Clause 14 deals with the definition of houses in multiple occupation. The Bill, as drafted, would have excluded homes with two cohabiting families from that definition and thus deprived people in those circumstances from the protection afforded by registration and the requirement to comply with important habitation quality standards. The Committee suggested that the clause be amended so that the existing definition would remain largely unchanged, but that there would be a sensible widening of the term "family" to include uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces. The Committee was pleased that the Department chose to table an amendment in line with its recommendation. The Committee hopes that the Department's actions in that respect are an indicator that it will make further efforts to engage with all stakeholders on the best way to monitor and improve standards in all HMOs. Consequently, the Committee is content with the Department's amendment to clause 14.

On several occasions in the past two years, the Committee for Social Development considered secondary legislation relating to the control of rents and registered tenancies. Often, those tenancies do not comply with basic habitation standards. Not surprisingly, the Committee was keen to limit rent increases for such properties. The Committee was advised that there was some question over the applicability of Assembly procedure to registered rents.

The Committee is pleased that the Department brought forward an amendment in line with the Committee's recommendation that Assembly procedure be added to the review of registered rents. The Committee believes that homes that do not comply with the most basic standards should be upgraded. For now, the Committee is content that that insertion to the Bill will add an appropriate level of Assembly control to what can be a contentious issue.

Given the eclectic nature of the Housing (Amendment) Bill, the Committee also considered other related housing matters. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a few remarks on those matters. The greater part of the Bill refers to social tenancies. However, as part of the Committee's consideration of the Bill, it briefly considered issues relating to the mandatory registration of private landlords. Members agreed to forgo any amendments on that matter, on the understanding that the Minister's next housing Bill will introduce certain measures in that respect. I ask the Minister to use her response to the debate as an opportunity to give the Committee and, indeed, all Members an assurance on, and brief outline of, her legislative intentions in that respect.

I thank the Minister and her Department for the useful exchanges with the Committee during Committee Stage. Committees are very much dependent on witnesses and other correspondents. It would, therefore, be remiss of me if I did not thank the many witnesses who responded to the Committee's request for evidence. I thank the organisations and individuals — there are too many to list now — who gave of their time freely and who made such high quality written and oral submissions during Committee Stage. The Housing (Amendment) Bill is good legislation that will be made better by the amendments that the Minister tabled today. Positive and constructive work was undertaken between the Committee and the Department.

I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement of the origins of many of the amendments. I praise her for her flexibility in adopting those amendments and bringing them forward this evening. I conclude by thanking you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for listening patiently to the Committee's conclusions on the Housing (Amendment) Bill. Notwithstanding the issues to which I referred, and about which I hope that the Minister will provide further assurances this evening, I commend the Housing (Amendment) Bill, as amended, to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the Minister for her explanation of the amendments. The Department was helpful in its dealings with the Committee, and it assisted our deliberations by taking on board many of our concerns. I will deal with some of the issues that have been raised, particularly those relating to the homelessness

strategy. Homelessness is a huge problem that, at any time, needs our attention but given that there are almost 40,000 people on the waiting list, it currently needs added attention.

The Committee heard from a number of people who wanted the Bill to include a requirement on the Housing Executive to produce a homelessness strategy as a duty, rather than the Housing Executive's having it as a power. It came down to an argument over the Department's preference that the wording should be that the Housing Executive "may" produce a homelessness strategy. The Committee was not necessarily happy with that. Like those who gave evidence, the Committee believes that insertion of the word "shall" in place of "may" would strengthen the Bill. We wait to see how the matter is handled by the Minister. It is in everyone's interest to ensure maximum protection for people who are unfortunate enough to find themselves homeless and who request, and expect, the Housing Executive to produce an annual housing strategy.

The Committee was asked to consider additions to the list of organisations that need to take homelessness into consideration when exercising their functions. The Committee believes that local councils have a major role to play. The Department opposed that view initially, but, after debate, it agreed that councils should be included in the list, given their role in the community.

The Committee welcomed the extension of the period for the review of decisions on homelessness from 21 days to 28 days. That is more in line with social security procedures and gives people an extra week to have their cases reviewed.

The first piece of advice that people get with regard to many aspects of housing, not least homelessness, is the most important, and it is crucial that we get it right. The Committee stressed the need for all documents to be worded in plain English so that they can be understood by people who may have difficulties. Housing authorities' translation services should also reflect that approach.

The Committee felt that the common housing selection scheme cannot deal with the crisis in housing, as many people are discriminated against because of the refusal to amend the Bill. We were given an undertaking that that, too, would be dealt with when the new housing Bill is discussed.

The Committee had concerns about antisocial activity and about the need to look at strengthening the hand of housing authorities and local residents. It is not, as some may think, just a policing problem; it is a societal problem, and something with which we all need to deal. People look to us to provide leadership on the issue, and if we do not step up to the mark, it will remain uncoordinated and largely ineffective.

The Committee dealt with the publication by housing authorities of antisocial policies and procedures. The Department said that housing associations were not statutory bodies and that it did not want to place statutory duties on them. In order to get round that, the Committee compromised and agreed that the housing association guide would be amended to require housing associations to publish their own antisocial policies. It was also a matter of concern that local residents were unclear about their rights when approaching housing authorities about antisocial behaviour.

The Committee expressed the concern of many in our communities about the practice by housing associations and the Housing Executive of moving antisocial tenants from one area to another without the knowledge of other associations, the Housing Executive or the host community. That has caused major problems in some areas. We are assured by the Department that that will be considered in the next housing Bill.

The Committee raised the issue of how residents' associations can be empowered and resourced properly to enable them to tackle some of the serious problems that they face in their areas. The associations find it difficult to obtain resources from any funding agency, and we need a strong commitment from everyone to defeat the scourge of antisocial activity. Residents' associations and local communities are best placed to do that, but we need to provide the tools for them to succeed. I commend the amendments and the Housing (Amendment) Bill. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the Consideration Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill and the amendments. All the amendments are Committee amendments, and as they have been addressed by the Committee Chairperson, I will confine my remarks to those that I feel are important. I am pleased that the Minister has accepted the Committee's recommendations; it

is a credit to her that she worked constructively with the Committee, and that a consensus was arrived at on the Bill.

The first two amendments add local councils and the Department of Health to those bodies that should have regard to the homelessness strategy. That is only sensible, because each body provides services that involve the homeless. Amendment No 3 requires the Housing Executive to have regard to the guidance issued by the Department on homelessness. That is only right in order to arrive at an holistic view of homelessness, thereby giving the Minister and her Department an active oversight role in issuing advice.

Amendment Nos 4 and 5 extend the timescales for appeals to bring them into line with similar provisions elsewhere in the social security system. That is the right thing to do. Amendment No 8 adds a new clause that makes a review of registered rents subject to negative resolution of the Assembly. That adds to the scrutiny role of the House and the Committee and is very welcome.

I am pleased that the Bill has reached this stage, and I am pleased at the level of co-operation between the Minister and the Committee thus far.

Mr Ford: This is one of those occasions when the House is considering legislation, and if you are not a member of the Committee or the Minister, you feel as if you are intruding on a private party. It was a pleasure to hear the unanimity so far. The days on which we can depend upon an SDLP Minister and a DUP Committee Chairperson agreeing on everything may be rare, so we should welcome them. I heard good reports from my colleague Anna Lo about how the Committee worked constructively with the Minister and her officials on the Bill.

I do not wish to detain the House excessively in considering the amendments. However, I will ensure that people know that I made a speech, lest Sammy Wilson or Edwin Poots be disappointed.

There were significant omissions in the duty to formulate a homelessness strategy — I speak as a district councillor — in not having district councils on the list. In my past life as a social worker, I looked after a part of the homelessness policy on behalf of the Housing Executive. The trusts and other regional bodies

were included, but not the DHSSPS itself. Rectification of that omission was necessary and is welcome.

As Mickey Brady said, people who are homeless frequently need time to get the appropriate advice, work through the appeals procedure or the court appeal procedure; therefore the extension from 21 to 28 days is a positive move. However, I am not sure that we have entirely cracked the problem of defining an HMO as opposed to an extended family. Nevertheless, we have at least ensured that there is recognition of the difference between a normal extended family, particularly in rural areas, and the HMOs in some urban areas. That is to be welcomed as a significant step forward.

I shall detain the House no longer. I endorse what has been said.

Mr Easton: As a member of the Social Development Committee, I welcome its recommendations, as they will contribute positively to a homelessness framework; a right of review on decisions affecting the homeless; and the provision of advice and information on homelessness. They will also strengthen the Department's regulatory role in respect of housing associations and change the definition of houses in multiple occupation.

The Committee recommended including district councils and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in clause 1, as they play a vital role in assisting the homeless. Clauses 5 and 9 refer to a tenant's right to appeal or review a decision. It is important that there are procedures to allow people to appeal a decision or request a second opinion. That is only right. The amendment to clause 11 on houses in multiple occupation will provide a clearer definition of an HMO.

I commend the amendments and add my support to the role that the Bill provides for the Housing Executive in producing a homelessness strategy. Homelessness is growing as people lose their jobs and so cannot pay their rent or mortgage; I hope that the Bill helps with both. We need to provide help free of charge to those in trouble, and we have a duty to provide a home for those who do not have one. We look forward to the development and publication of the strategy in due course.

Mrs M Bradley: As a member of the Social Development Committee, I, too, support the

Bill and the amendments. Committee members present understand the Bill's purpose. Both the Minister and the Chairperson have given the House a good summary of the Bill and the amendments.

9.15 pm

I warmly welcome this legislation because it will enhance and refresh the existing housing laws. The amendments will tie up several loose ends, and the Bill has been studied carefully by the Committee. I am certain that the Minister welcomed the Committee's feedback on the amendments.

There is much to welcome; the Bill covers important issues such as homelessness, landlord registration and houses in multiple occupation. There is much focus in it on helping homeless people, and that reflects the Minister's commitment to protecting the most vulnerable. Clause 1 rubber-stamps the requirement for the Housing Executive to publish a homelessness strategy every five years, and the amendment will ensure that the Department of Health and local councils pay close attention to that strategy. We all welcome that.

Clauses 2 and 5, and the associated amendments, also deal with homelessness and enhance the Bill. The amendments will ensure that homeless people, or those about to be made homeless, get the right advice in good time. The amendment to clause 14 ties up a few loose ends in relation to houses in multiple occupation. The legislation on that issue needs to be absolutely watertight. This type of HMO arrangement has become a real problem in some areas of Belfast. Some Members present took part in the debate on HMOs in the Holylands only a few weeks ago, and they understand the issue well.

The Bill also covers related issues, such as antisocial behaviour and nuisance neighbours. This is the type of legislation that is required if we are to get a grip on those problems, although I suspect that some Members would like an even tougher landlord registration scheme to be put in place.

I will not talk about every clause or amendment to the Bill. I have briefly mentioned the issues that are considered to be among the most important. I simply offer my full support and the support of my colleague Thomas Burns, who cannot be here tonight, to this Bill and the

proposed amendments. I urge all Members who are present to support the Bill. I thank the Minister and her officials for bringing the Bill to the House.

The Minister for Social Development: I am grateful to the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee and the various Members, namely Mickey Brady, Billy Armstrong, David Ford, Alex Easton and Mary Bradley, for their contributions to the debate on the amendments.

As I explained earlier, these amendments have been agreed by the Committee and will promote joined-up government, enhance the transparency and effectiveness of homelessness review procedures, ensure that the Housing Executive's powers to deal with overcrowding are not unduly restricted, and strengthen Assembly control over procedures for dealing with abandoned tenancies and increasing registered rents.

I will now address some of the points that were raised by members of the Committee, including the Chairperson. I understand that some members of the Social Development Committee take the view that clause 1 is drafted to give the Housing Executive a discretionary power to produce a homelessness strategy rather than placing a statutory duty on the executive to produce such a strategy. That point was raised by the Chairperson of the Committee and by Mickey Brady. I assure them and other Members that that is not the case.

The Housing Executive published its first homelessness strategy in 2002. A working group that was established by the Department to promote the social inclusion of homeless people subsequently recommended that there should be a legal requirement for a new homelessness strategy to be published every five years. Clause 1 will make the necessary provision for that. The wording that is used in clause 1 was based on equivalent provision for England, which provides that local housing authorities may publish a homelessness strategy but requires those authorities to carry out that function in certain ways. As a consequence, the production of a homelessness strategy is essentially a statutory duty rather than a discretionary power. Replacing the word "may" in clause 1 with "shall" would not be a simple matter, as it would be necessary to introduce further consequential amendments to the Bill.

Although clause 1, as drafted, will give the Housing Executive the statutory authority to continue to allocate resources to the production of the homelessness strategy, it will also require the executive to publish the homelessness strategy within 12 months of clause 1 coming into operation and to publish a new strategy within five years of the publication of the previous strategy. In the circumstances, it will be apparent that the requirement to publish a homelessness strategy is an inescapable statutory duty.

Given that the duties that are imposed on the Housing Executive by clause 1 will meet in full the recommendations of the homelessness working group, I am satisfied that no amendment to clause 1 is required. Although the Committee would like to see a requirement in clause 1 for the Housing Executive to report annually on the homelessness strategy, that can be achieved through an amendment to the executive's management statement. I assure the House that I will put in place the necessary procedures following the enactment of the Bill.

The amendment to clause 2 will require the Housing Executive to have regard to departmental guidance on the form and content of homelessness advice. I assure Members that, before such guidance is issued, my officials will discuss the draft guidance with the Committee.

I know that in relation to clause 4, Committee members are concerned that minimum standards of advice and assistance provided to homeless people by the Housing Executive should be specified. The aim of clause 4 is to enable my Department to prescribe in regulations the type of advice and assistance provided by the Housing Executive to homeless people. It is intended that minimum standards will be set out in the regulations, and my officials will be happy to discuss those proposed regulations with the Committee after the Bill is passed.

Similarly, my officials will be happy to discuss proposals for regulations to be made under clause 5 to prescribe the procedure for carrying out reviews of decisions taken on applications for homelessness assistance. The regulations will aim to ensure that such reviews are conducted in a way that meets appropriate standards, including the right to a fair hearing.

The Social Development Committee has expressed concerns about the ability of social housing landlords to deal with antisocial

behaviour. The Committee Chairperson referred to that. Although the Bill touches on the subject, I am pleased to confirm that more substantive measures are planned. The consultation paper on further housing legislation that I published on 7 December 2009 contains full details of those proposals. I commend that publication to the Committee and the House.

The Committee has also highlighted the need for a more consistent approach by, and better communication between, social landlords on antisocial behaviour. Again, I draw Members' attention to the consultation paper that was published on 7 December, particularly the proposals around information sharing. While proposals for future legislation are being developed, I will ensure that my Department will have the guidance that it provides to the Housing Executive and registered housing associations, which informs social landlords of the powers available to them and how they should be used.

Clause 12 provides for increased representation of the Northern Ireland Housing Council on the Housing Executive board, which I note was referred to by the Chairperson of the Committee. I am aware of the views of some members of the Social Development Committee on the appointment process. I believe that the overriding principle must be selection based on merit. However, I am content to take all reasonable steps within the bounds of the rules on public appointments to encourage greater tenant representation.

Some members of the Social Development Committee, particularly Mr Brady, who is in the House, have proposed changes to the way in which social housing is allocated under the housing selection scheme. Although the Bill does not cover that, I have asked my officials to ensure that the scheme allows us to make the most effective use of social housing stock against a background of rising demand and tight budgets. I am convinced that we must allocate housing in a way that recognises those realities, and I am currently considering proposals for modernising the selection scheme. That work is at an early stage, but I hope to see changes to the scheme, including the allocation of additional points to long-term hostel residents.

Mr Hamilton and Mr Brady referred to homelessness advice and translation services. Information currently provided by the Housing

Executive to the public is in plain English and is available in alternative formats, including other languages. I assure Members that advice provided under clause 2 will conform to the same high standards.

I want to provide Mr Hamilton with additional information on the subject of antisocial behaviour, which he also raised. We have already provided some assurances to the Member, and guidance has been issued that reminds the Housing Executive that the transfer of antisocial tenants is not necessarily a solution to the problem. I think that issue was also raised by Mr Brady. I am currently considering detailed proposals to amend the housing selection scheme to give social landlords authority to refuse transfer applications from tenants who have been sanctioned for antisocial behaviour.

Furthermore, the proposals for future housing legislation that were published on 7 December 2009 include proposals to allow social landlords to refuse applications for an exchange of tenancy where either household has been sanctioned for antisocial behaviour. There are also proposals to improve information sharing between social landlords about such sanctions.

9.30 pm

Mr Hamilton also asked whether homeless applicants will be advised of their right of appeal. They will be advised. Although it would not be appropriate to prescribe that level of detail in the Bill, I will ensure that when an applicant for homelessness assistance is found to be ineligible, the Housing Executive will provide notice in writing of the decision and inform the person of his or her right to request a review of that decision. In addition, the notice will provide details of sources of independent advice. I will also ensure that, where unsuccessful applicants have exhausted the review process, the Housing Executive will advise them of their right of appeal and of the availability of advice and assistance. All those types of advice, assistance and assurance will be available to people who find themselves in that plight. I agree with Mr Hamilton that facing homelessness, without a roof over one's head, is a plight for most people.

Mr Hamilton also referred to landlord registration. Proposals for the private rented sector were set out in the Building Sound Foundations strategy, which was published for consultation on 15 May 2009. Although the strategy is being finalised, I

can confirm that it will include a mandatory, light-touch landlord registration scheme, which will require new legislation. I can assure the House that that provision will be contained in the next housing Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker, although I know that I will still have to propose the amendments formally, I commend all the amendments to the Bill to the House.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Amendment No 2 made: In page 2, line 9, at end insert

“() the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety;”. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

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

Clause 2 (Duty of Executive to provide advice)

Amendment No 3 made: In page 4, line 4, at end insert

“(4) In relation to the form and content of advice under paragraph (1) the Executive shall have regard to any guidance issued by the Department.” — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 and 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 (Reviews of decisions in relation to homelessness)

Amendment No 4 made: In page 5, line 14, leave out “21” and insert “28”. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

Amendment No 5 made: In page 6, line 19, leave out “21” and insert “28”. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

Clause 5, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 6 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 (Abandonment of introductory tenancies)

Amendment No 6 made: In page 13, line 10, at end insert

“(3A) In Article 148(3)(b) (orders and regulations) after the word ‘regulations’ insert ‘(other than regulations under Article 19A(3))’.” — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 10 to 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14 (Definition of “house in multiple occupation”)

Amendment No 7 made: In page 14, line 27, leave out from beginning to “Article” in line 29 and insert

“at the end add ‘and for that purpose’. — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

Clause 14, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 15 and 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 8 made: After clause 16, insert the following new clause

“Amendment of Article 55 of the Order of 2006

16A. In Article 55 of the Order of 2006 (review of registered rents) at the end add—

‘(8) An order under paragraph (5) shall be subject to negative resolution.’” — [The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 17 to 19 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker

Executive Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I beg to move

That the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA 3/09] do now pass.

The Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill has reached its Final Stage today. When I moved the Second Stage of the Bill in the House on 29 September 2009, I said that the existing provision for the payment of a subsidy to Northern Ireland Water would expire on 31 March 2010. The Bill will provide the legislative basis for continued funding of our water and sewerage services beyond April 2010. Therefore, it remains important that the Bill complete its progress through the Assembly as soon as possible.

I welcome the support that the Bill has received, and, whatever we think about how water and sewerage services should be funded in the longer term, we have agreed that a proper legal basis for that funding must remain in place.

Finally, I thank the members of the Committee for Regional Development for helping to ensure the Bill's smooth passage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Fred Cobain, the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): Agreed, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr B Wilson: As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I support the Bill with some reluctance. There is no viable alternative to it, but it is not satisfactory. It is unacceptable that, after three years, the Executive have still not resolved how we pay for our water.

We must now pass the Bill to ensure that Northern Ireland Water has funding for the new financial year. However, having passed the Bill, it should not be assumed that Northern Ireland Water will automatically be funded from the block grant for the next three years. The Bill is essential so that Northern Ireland Water can be funded for 2010-11, but the uncertainty cannot be allowed to continue. It is time that the Executive grasped the nettle and resolved the

question of how water should be funded in the longer term. Let me make it clear: I am totally opposed to water charges based on property values, which would seem to be the obvious alternative. Such charges are grossly unfair and would fall heavily on the elderly and those on fixed incomes.

However, I recognise that an alternative means to fund water and sewerage services must be found. It cannot be met from the block grant at the expense of other services. The fact is that, under the Barnett formula, there is nothing in the block grant to pay for water. In the rest of the UK, consumers pay charges directly to water companies. There is no call on public finance. Therefore, Northern Ireland Water must be funded either from existing resources, namely the regional rate or the block grant. Indeed, the £300 million payment to Northern Ireland Water is similar to the £367 million of Budget cuts that have been proposed by the Finance Minister.

Therefore, if the Executive decide to continue funding Northern Ireland Water from the block grant, there must be a reduction in resources that are available for other services, such as housing, education and health. As health comprises half of the total Budget, the burden of paying for water services inevitably falls most heavily on the Health Service, which is already underfunded. I highlighted that issue in my Budget speech in November 2007, when I pointed out that, in the absence of alternative funding for water services, the Health Service's budget had been reduced, which would, inevitably, lead to cuts in services and significant redundancies. Unfortunately, that prediction has proved to be correct.

In practice, because of demographic trends and the fact that NHS inflation is significantly higher than basic inflation, the increase in the Health Service budget represented, at best, a freeze in overall expenditure. That compared with an increase of 4% in real terms in the English Health Service. The budget was, therefore, unable to meet new demands, such as full implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford report. In order to provide funding for the Water Service, we were required to accept a de facto freeze in the budget and a level of service below that of the rest of the United Kingdom.

In deciding to continue to fund water services from the block grant, the Executive have taken

the easy option. However, they ignored the costs of provision of other services. That cannot continue. The issue of water charges is one for the full Executive and not for the Minister for Regional Development, as some people seem to suggest. There must be open debate on the implications of a decision to continue to fund water services from the block grant and the impact that that has on other services.

The public must be made aware of the issue and must be allowed to make a choice between non-payment of water charges and reduction of the provision of health and education. That issue has been raised by a number of people who gave evidence to the Committee for Regional Development. The Executive can no longer avoid the issue of funding for water services. It is fundamental to long-term financial planning. We must consider other forms of taxation, particularly one that is based on ability to pay.

The Executive must revisit the options for funding of local government services. Both the Lyons inquiry and the Burt review into local government in England and Scotland respectively have suggested changes to local government finance that should be considered. The Executive must review all options, particularly income-based alternatives, such as local income tax. That would clearly be fair because it is based on ability to pay. It would also mean that non-taxed householders would contribute to funding. Other options include local sales tax, service tax, land value tax and green taxes, which would help the environment as well as raising revenue, based on the principle that the polluter pays.

All options must be examined. The Assembly should seek to acquire tax-raising powers, so that all increases in public expenditure are not met solely from property tax that is paid by the ratepayer, but from a basket of taxes. Therefore, I ask the Executive to set up a review into the funding of local services and to consider a move from a property-based tax to a mainly income-based tax. That review would also examine other options. If necessary, legislation should be changed to give the Assembly tax-raising powers. It is important that the burden of taxation is spread more evenly and does not continue to fall most heavily on the elderly and on people who are on fixed incomes.

In conclusion, although I support the Bill, it is unsatisfactory that the Assembly has still not

resolved the long-term funding of water services. The implementation of the Bill must, inevitably, lead to cuts in other services, particularly health, which currently consumes 50% of the Budget. It is essential that the Executive no longer ignore the issue, but consider alternative methods of funding services, such as water. It should not be based solely on property values. All options must be considered.

9.45 pm

The Minister for Regional Development: As ever, I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development for the Committee's support for the matter.

I remind Brian Wilson that the Bill does not relate to how water and sewerage services are funded, and I said that when the Bill was proceeding through the House. The Bill is merely a device to allow the Executive to continue to fund those services. Even if the Executive had to make a decision on charging, there would still have to be a device to pay Northern Ireland Water to carry out its functions. I have to say, therefore, that the Member is speaking in the wrong debate. If he wishes to table a motion for debate, I will be happy to engage with him, but this is not the relevant debate. I feel slightly sorry for him, because he has waited here all night to make his points.

The Executive have made a decision. Brian Wilson said that the Executive avoided making a decision, but they have made a decision. In the light of the economic circumstances, the Executive decided that it would be unfair to burden households with additional bills. I support that decision, as did all the parties in the Executive. Brian Wilson has stated his position. I have listened to him on a number of occasions when the matter has been raised. I know what he is against, and I know that he wants us to explore other options, but I am not sure what he is in favour of. It would be helpful if he could let us know. He does not want a property based charge for anything. That is fair enough, and it is his prerogative to think that. He wants us to examine a range of other options, but he has never said how he would fund the services.

I caution him not to fall into the trap that others have fallen into. There is a deficit in the Executive's Budget that has hung neatly on the cost of water and sewerage services. The Executive spend billions of pounds annually

providing a range of services. The deficit in our Budget is not solely connected to the provision of water and sewerage services. It is to do with how the Executive spend, save and raise their money, and that covers a range of services. Brian Wilson should not fall into the trap of thinking that the neat figure of the deficit in the Executive's Budget exists simply because we have not charged households for the provision of water and sewerage services. I advise him to look across the full range of services that the Executive provide, as he advocates. He has advocated exploring all the options, but I would be interested to hear what option he favours, because I have yet to hear that. Perhaps he will inform us of that on the other side of an election.

The Bill is a device to allow us to continue to do what we have been doing. It is needed in any circumstances in the foreseeable future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

*That the Water and Sewerage Services
(Amendment) Bill [NIA 3/09] do now pass.*

Adjourned at 9.48 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel
(Mr S Wilson):** I beg to move

*That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern
Ireland) 2010 be affirmed.*

As Members will know, the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 is routine subordinate legislation that flows from Budget decisions that the Executive have made. The legislation stems from the Executive-agreed Budget that was brought to the Assembly on 22 January 2008. That Budget covered the three-year comprehensive spending review (CSR) period for 2008-2011, and the agreed regional rates were intended to provide ratepayers with greater certainty and stability.

The legislation fixes the two regional rates for 2010-11: one for households and one for business ratepayers. The regional rates are worked out in pence to allow individual rates bills to be set, and the figures are calculated precisely to reflect the decisions that we made on the level of increases. I say "increases" with some hesitation, because we have done a great deal to keep rates down over the CSR period, and I will give details presently on how we have done that.

As Members will be aware, the regional rate supplements Northern Ireland's share of the relevant public expenditure, providing an extra 6% over and above our Barnett settlement and extra funds to help finance departmental expenditure on our hospitals, roads, schools and other essential public services in our charge. The regional rate represents a little more than half the typical rates bill.

Local councils set the district rate, which makes up the rest of the rates bill. As Members will be aware, the setting of the district rate is outside the Executive's control. Local councils determine it according to their expenditure needs. The councils that have kept increases for the next year to a minimum and below the rate of inflation are to be commended. For others, it appears that further work needs to be done to ensure that increases in rates bills are kept to a minimum.

The rates struck by district councils should mean that households face overall rate increases of no more than 2.9% next year. In addition, there should be overall rate increases for the non-domestic sector of no more than 3.8%. With respect to the regional rate itself, the domestic element will be frozen in cash terms for the third year, which will provide a real saving to all households.

Those who seek an end to devolved government in Northern Ireland and, by implication, a return to direct rule, should be careful what they wish for if recent experience is anything to go by. A whopping 19% levy was forced on households here in the last year of direct rule in 2006.

In the commercial sector, a 2.7% increase is to be applied next year. That was set and agreed by the Executive and the Assembly as part of the 2008-09 to 2010-11 Budget processes and follows last year's cash freeze, which in real terms was, effectively, a reduction. The minimal rate increase in the non-domestic sector for the next financial year represents a freeze in real terms and, given inflation of 3.5%, complements a wide range of measures the Executive have introduced to help businesses. Taken together, the domestic and commercial rates will raise around £556.2 million in 2010-11.

I do not have to remind Members how tight public finances are. Although today's debate should not revisit decisions already made, we are at

the limit of what is affordable and have nothing in reserve. We have already held industrial rates at 30%, and in the coming financial year we are introducing a small business rates relief scheme, forgoing approximately £9 million in revenue. Those come on top of other easements provided since devolution was restored, a further lowering of the maximum household rates and the introduction of a lone pensioner allowance. However, to go the other way and raise more from ratepayers would place an unacceptable burden on ordinary people during this extraordinary economic downturn.

It should also be remembered that the amount that can be raised through a 1% increase in the regional rate is relatively modest and is less than £6 million in the context of financing public expenditure more generally. That is particularly relevant when one considers the £790 million that has been made available to Departments as a result of the ongoing efficiency savings. Much is there for the taking through driving efficiencies and realising savings by changing the way that public services are delivered, and I look forward to debating that range of issues with Members in a moment.

I now turn to more technical matters and will briefly run through the Order itself. The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 specifies the regional rate poundages for the 2010-11 financial year. Article 1 provides the title of the Order and gives its operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the Order will apply for the 2010-11 rating year through to 31 March 2011, and article 3 specifies 30-69p in the pound as the commercial regional rate poundage and 0-3608p in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage. I look forward to hearing Members' comments during what promises to be a lively debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks.

The purpose of the Order is to fix the regional rate for the financial year ending 31 March 2011, which is the final financial year covered by the freeze in the domestic rate agreed by the Assembly in the Budget approved in January 2008. Members will be aware that, although an agreement was made at that time to peg the level of increase in non-domestic rates

to the rate of inflation, that was superseded for the year ending 31 March 2010, when, in response to the economic downturn, the non-domestic rate was frozen in cash terms to assist businesses. For 2010-11, the non-domestic rate will revert to the rate that was agreed in 2008, which is a 2.7% increase.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel received a briefing from departmental officials on the proposals for the subordinate legislation at its meeting on 6 January 2010. At that meeting, members asked why revenue from regional rates was projected to increase by only £600,000 from 2009-2010 to 2010-11, given that non-domestic rates will rise by 2.7%. The officials subsequently wrote to the Committee to advise that the figures that were provided were net revenue projections that had taken account of the value of relief and exemptions foregone. Furthermore, new reliefs will come into operation in 2010-11, including the small business rates relief scheme, which alone will account for an estimated £8 million to £9 million in revenue foregone.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel formally considered the statutory rule before the Assembly at its meeting on 10 February 2010, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At that meeting, the Committee agreed by majority vote to recommend to the Assembly that the Rates (Regional Rates) Order 2010 be affirmed. On behalf of the Committee, I therefore support the motion, which seeks the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of the Order.

I will now make a couple of comments about our party's position on the issue. As the Minister said, the regional rate is set by the Executive and the Assembly, and it generates additional moneys to support local public services here. Our party's position is that rates, particularly household rates, should be income-related, and a system should be put in place that offers reliefs based on a person's ability to pay. That should be central to any rates policy.

Mr Weir: I support the motion. It is consistent with the overall approach. I also supported it in Committee. If my memory is correct, all but two Committee members supported the Order. What is being proposed today is in line with the consistent long-term position of the Executive and the Finance Minister. It is a fulfilment of the three-year budgetary process. As the Minister

indicated, it shows the value of devolution and the difference that it can make.

We saw rapid regional rates increases during the direct rule period — on one occasion up to 19%. That was a slap in the face not only to ratepayers but to local councils that strove to keep down the local rates. Time and again we had a situation in which efficiencies were sought in local government and brought about by local councils, while at the same time it was all simply cancelled out by that great wave of regional rate increases. I suspect that Mr Farry will mention the fact that the proposed Order is out of line with what is happening elsewhere, but the whole purpose of devolution is to take account of a different situation.

There is no doubt that we have gone through difficult times because of the recession. The aim to put the economy and businesses at the top of the agenda is borne out by the regional rates freeze in the domestic sector and the cap at 2.7%, which is the rate of inflation, in the non-domestic sector. That shows that Northern Ireland is a place in which the burden on the ratepayer is kept to a minimum. That is right, particularly at a time of recession.

The Minister referred to the amount of money that a regional rate increase would raise. For example, a 1% increase in the domestic regional rate would equate to around £2.8 million. If Mr Farry and others had their way and we were to see escalating rates increases, it would have a minimal impact on the overall public finances.

Dr Farry: No doubt I will have more to say in a moment, but will the Member clarify what a 1% rise would generate? A few moments ago the Minister referred to £6 million, whereas the Member has now referred to £2.8 million.

Mr Weir: It is good to see that the Member is not listening to what I am saying. I said that the £2.8 million would accrue from a rise in domestic rates. The £6 million that the Minister referred to would be accrued by a 1% rise across all the regional rates, encompassing non-domestic and domestic.

The regional rate accounts for around £560 million. Given the Member's long experience in local government, I am sure that he does not need to be told — perhaps he does — about the difference between the domestic rate and the non-domestic rate.

12.15 pm

An increase of 1% in the domestic rate would raise approximately £2.8 million. Consequently, if the Member were to have his way by placing undue burdens on the ratepayers of Northern Ireland, a minimal amount would be generated for the public purse. Last week, the House debated Supply resolutions of £13 billion and £15 billion, so Mr Farry's route and that of the Alliance Party would have little impact on public finances but would place an undue additional burden on individuals. That is why the proposals are to be welcomed.

As I said, they are part of an overall pattern, and the Minister referred to the fact that they are not to be seen in isolation but as part of the drive for a low-tax economy through low rates. That includes the measures to cap industrial rates, small business rates, which will be introduced this year, and the lone pensioner allowance that has been brought in. It is consistent with the overall message.

In the current difficult economic circumstances, the capping of the non-domestic rate at the rate of inflation will prevent an undue burden being placed on the business sector. That is right, and, as a result of the Executive's actions, particularly those of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, people are in employment today who would not otherwise be so. If the non-domestic rate were not capped, it would, in many ways, be the straw that would break the camel's back.

The proposals are welcome moves that show the prudence of the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Therefore, I urge the House to support the Rates (Regional Rates) Order.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for bringing the Order to the House, and I commend him for his professional attitude to the issue. I welcome the continued freeze on domestic rates, which will help households through the recession. However, will the Minister share the predictions that his Department is considering on the level of regional rates after 2011-12? I ask that question in light of the ongoing fiscal crisis here and the debt crisis across the United Kingdom that the Government face.

I fear that the reforms in local government could also add to the burden and pressure on ratepayers. Will the Minister confirm his

preferred policy on how local government reforms might be financed?

I recognise why the non-domestic rate has been returned to its 2008 level. However, I also note that that will have a negative impact on businesses across Northern Ireland, which face diminishing markets and ever-increasing costs. Given the ongoing financial difficulties, it would be remiss of me not to mention the fact that rate collection is extremely important to maintaining public spending. Businesses and people who benefit from services have a duty to pay their rates. Similarly, the Department of Finance and Personnel has a duty to all citizens who pay rates and to other Departments to collect rates effectively in Northern Ireland. The Department set itself a collection target of 98%, but it has achieved 91%. I understand that that 7% shortfall represents a loss of £71.5 million to the public purse. As I stated previously, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has asked other Departments to make savings of almost £400 million. Surely he has to consider ways in which to improve his Department's effectiveness. An improvement in that direction that yielded an extra £71 million would surely make the Executive's decisions much easier.

However, taking all that into consideration, I am pleased to inform the Minister that the Ulster Unionist Party supports the Order.

Mr O'Loan: I support the motion to affirm the Rates (Regional Rates) Order. I agree with the Member who said that any rates system is not a perfect one. Any revenue-raising system ought to be fundamentally based on people's ability to pay. However, given that a rates system is a property tax, it is not a perfectly adjusted mechanism that corresponds to ability to pay. That is why we introduced a considerable number of new reliefs into the system, which has now become quite complex. Those new reliefs will make the system more commensurate with the principle that the revenue that is required from businesses or households should correspond to their ability to pay. We have achieved that to some degree, because we have a better system than we had before.

The proposed measures in the Order correspond to those that were in the initial three-year Budget. Obviously, we have wider concerns about that Budget, but now is not the time to discuss them. At the outset, we broadly supported those measures. However, we are now in very

different economic times where the pressures on businesses and households are much greater than they were then. Even though the Executive's Budget is hard-pressed at the moment, the suggestion that we should address that by significantly raising the rate burden is not well founded. Indeed, the rate burden would have to be increased significantly to make any real contribution to the £370 million deficit that we have been discussing in recent days.

We are also aware that the pressures that are involved in collecting rates are considerable. That is an indication that people are finding it difficult to pay their rates. The amount of rate arrears needs to be reduced, but that is a difficult task at present, because people are genuinely finding it difficult to pay their rates.

It has been explained clearly and Members should note that the Order will not freeze the rates, even though some Members said that it will. In fact, it is proposed that the non-domestic rate be increased by 2.7%. Members should further note that, were that measure introduced on its own, it would increase the take from that element of the rates by around £15 million. However, given that other measures coexist alongside that one, the total rates take from the non-domestic sector will be virtually nil. Indeed, the Minister pointed that out. One such measure is the small business rates relief scheme, which will effectively redistribute the rates burden across the non-domestic sector and which I strongly support. It will also make the system more broadly related to the non-domestic sector's ability to pay and will confer a social benefit on small businesses, in particular small post offices, which is good.

Members should also note that the decision to freeze the domestic regional rate for next year has provided district councils with something of an escape clause. I declare an interest as a member of Ballymena Borough Council. That council has increased its rates by considerably more than the rate of inflation, as have other councils. The decision not to increase the domestic regional rate has created a sense of freedom among the councils, given that the total rates burden on households was not going to be as great as the percentage increase that the councils were imposing. That factor needs to be borne in mind when considering our policy on regional rates in the future.

Dr Farry: I assure the House that I do not intend to launch a seven-hour debate, as was the case last week. I pay tribute to the Minister of Finance and Personnel's staying power on that occasion. I apologise for missing his winding-up speech, but I am sure that he did not miss the mark. However, I have a few things to say in today's debate, and I ask Members please to be patient with me.

We, as a party, oppose the Order. There is principled and constructive opposition from these Benches to a decision made by the Executive as a whole. It may have been inspired by the DUP — it has that party's fingerprints on it — but it was a collective decision of the four parties that currently reside in the Executive.

At a time of significant financial difficulties in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the world, it is simply bizarre that the Executive should seek to address the entire £370 million budgetary shortfall for the forthcoming financial year through making cuts, efficiency savings or administrative savings — call them what you will. Members may talk about better budgetary processes, the bottomless pit of administrative savings and the need to reprioritise policies and programmes, all of which are worthy of further pursuance and consideration, but they are not enough to address the current challenge. Already, as various Committees scrutinise the proposals brought to them by Ministers, we can see what making cuts will mean. The long list of cuts in health and education provision and employment and learning will affect our ability to address problems with the economy.

A freeze in the domestic regional rate is, in real terms, a tax cut. Therefore, a tax cut is being proposed at a time of budgetary cuts. Moreover, it is a tax cut that benefits those who are better off at the expense of those who are worse off.

In the Chamber, all parties, in particular the two parties on either side of the Alliance Benches, have said much about the need to make tough decisions, to be bold and to strike out. However, that is empty rhetoric. When it comes to making tough decisions, those parties will not be involved.

Northern Ireland's Government are outside the mainstream in their approach to addressing the Budget deficit. Other jurisdictions take a more balanced approach through considering a combination of revenue-raising measures and cuts in spending. The debate in those jurisdictions is not on whether to use the

various instruments but on how to find the correct balance. That is true of Westminster, where the three main parties accept the need to use both approaches but disagree over the balance between the two. It is also the case in the Republic of Ireland, where people praised the Government for taking austerity measures in an attempt to rebalance the economy.

I fully agree with Peter Weir's point that, in Northern Ireland, we have the freedom to do things differently. That is what devolution is all about, and I defend that. However, in doing so, we should not be reckless, and we should heed what other legislatures are doing and learn lessons from them.

Mr Weir: The Member referred to the Republic of Ireland, where, as I understand it, the Budget deficit is some £30 billion or £40 billion. Given the level of that gap in public expenditure, the need for austerity is somewhat different: for example, a 1% rise in our domestic rate would raise only £3 million. Does the Member concede that he is not comparing like with like? Similarly, given the position of the UK economy as a whole, the deficit amounts to billions of pounds. The amount that could be raised through an increase in the regional rate is, even in relation to Northern Ireland's budgetary position, extremely small.

Dr Farry: I am talking about the general principle of how responsible Governments elsewhere in the world respond to such situations. Northern Ireland has a significant deficit of £370 million in its Budget. Although the impact of external factors means that the deficit may not be entirely the doing of the Executive, it has a major impact on public services, as we will see over the weeks to come as Committees and Ministers work through the different recommendations. We may find ourselves in a situation whereby a 1% increase could raise £3 million. However, at the moment, inflation is pushing 3%, and, therefore, perhaps it would be better to talk about raising £9 million.

The cumulative effect of rises in inflation over the past number of years equates to £20 million or more in additional rates revenue. By itself, that will not address the £370 million gap, but it would be a start and it would help. If additional rates revenue allows us to address the deficiencies in community mental health that were identified by the Royal College of Psychiatrists on Friday, that would be to the

betterment of society. If it allows us to continue with the capital build programme in education, that is of benefit to society. Therefore, although it would not resolve the full problem in one fell swoop — far from it — it would allow us a bit more flexibility and room for manoeuvre.

12.30 pm

Mr O'Loan: The Member has spoken of tough decisions. He is a spokesperson for the Alliance Party, which was, of course, the principled party of opposition at one point. Was it a tough decision for his party to consider taking the justice Ministry? Given that the Member advocates increasing the rates burden and using the money to address the issues that he just outlined, what percentage increase does he propose for domestic and non-domestic rates?

Dr Farry: If I talk about the devolution of policing and justice and the related Ministry, I will incur the wrath of the Speaker, as the Member should have. Addressing that issue is a bit of a stretch in a debate on rates. My party has been principled in the approach that it has taken; the issue is acting in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. The SDLP needs to grow up when it comes to the justice issue and to stop griping from the sidelines.

We have not suggested that the full funding gap should be addressed through the regional rate. The Minister said that a 140% rise in the regional rate would be required to address the funding gap, and that would be reckless. When there was a 19% hike in rates during the last days of direct rule, we opposed it as totally out of proportion and reckless. People who are casting aspersions on the Hillsborough agreement and who may be frustrating progress in Northern Ireland would do well to remember what the consequences of direct rule will be for our finances if things here do not work over the next few weeks.

Throughout the three years of the Budget, we have consistently said that we should be seeking to increase the regional rate for both domestic and non-domestic users by a percentage around the rate of inflation. Therefore, as costs rise for the delivery of public services, the revenue will rise in step with that. In Northern Ireland, we have been giving out a tax cut — a benefit to people — particularly with the domestic rate. Not everyone in society pays rates; those who are better off tend to pay more and, therefore, benefit disproportionately

from any cut. Mr O'Loan calls himself a social democrat or a socialist, but I have great difficulty in seeing where his party's rhetoric on social justice sits with the approach that he is taking to finance today. If the Member wants to intervene, he should, by all means, try to defend himself on that point.

Mr O'Loan: The Member stated that his position is to increase rates by the rate of inflation. What rate of inflation would he use? At present, the rate of inflation is around 2.5% or 3%. Most economists would suggest that that is a temporary rise that owes much to the reinstatement of the 17.5% rate of VAT. Over the past year, the rate of inflation has been very much less than that, and, as I said, most commentators would expect that, over the coming year, it will once again be a lot less than is currently the case. The Order applies a 2.7% increase to the non-domestic rate, which matches the temporarily high rate of inflation. That does what the Member asks for.

If he is proposing to increase the domestic rate by the rate of inflation, which rate of inflation should be applied? If we consider the typical rate of inflation in the past year and that which is expected in the incoming financial year, the extra revenue that will be generated is in the order of less than 1%. Therefore, is the Member making a fuss about something that will possibly bring in around £2 million to £3 million?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask that interventions be brief.

Mr O'Loan: The Member says that other parties are showing no principle on the issue. It seems to me that his case is rather weak.

Dr Farry: That intervention may have been longer than Mr O'Loan's original speech.

First, Mr O'Loan did not address the point that I made about his party's rhetoric on social justice. Therefore, I will proceed on the basis that the SDLP does not believe in the reality of social justice, just the rhetoric of it. Secondly, if the Member wants to cite economists, it is interesting to note that 60 economists have now come out against Mr McNarry's 20 economists from last week. However, there is almost unanimity among local economists — including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors (IOD) and the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI) —

that the Executive's measures on the regional rate are a regressive subsidy to the better off in society. Moreover, the opportunity cost of the measures is lost revenue. The amount raised from rates may be fairly minimal, but every little bit helps in trying to address the £370 million shortfall.

The next time that Mr O'Loan complains about a cut — whether it be in health, education or social development funding — that amounts to around £3 million, or £9 million if we proceed on the basis of inflation, he should stand back and reflect on his comments that the debate is meaningless and a distraction from the Assembly's real business. I can conclude only that Mr O'Loan is so eager to talk about some Back-Bench private Member's motion rather than do the real work that he does not want to address the fundamentals of our economy.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Go ahead.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. I assume that he will not accuse me of being an advocate of social justice.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is a scandalous suggestion.

Mr Weir: Yes; I know that we are covered by the libel laws in here, but to accuse me of that may be going a little bit far.

The Member said what the Alliance Party "would have done" over the past three years. I seek clarification on the Alliance Party's position on the Order. Would the party simply increase the domestic rate purely by inflation at today's rate, which, depending on precisely how it is measured, is somewhere between £7 million and £9 million, or would it bring the domestic rate back up to the level that it was at three years ago? That would involve imposing a £20 million increase, which equates to around an 8% or 9% increase this year. I know that the Member said that "every little helps", which might be described as the Tesco solution. However, will he clarify the Alliance Party's position?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Weir for his intervention. We would not have started the Budget from the same position as the Executive. The Executive should have pegged domestic and non-domestic regional rates at the level of inflation over each of the three years of the Budget. We suggest that the Assembly support the 2.7% rise in

the non-domestic regional rate, as outlined in the Order, and introduce an equivalent rise in the regional rate. Even I recognise that to undo the rates retrospectively would represent a disproportionate hike for Northern Ireland's households and businesses. However, had the regional rate been managed more responsibly over the three years, the cumulative effect would have put the Budget in a much better position than it is in today. I hope that that clarifies our position.

I will clarify for Mr O'Loan the point that I made on inflation. A number of different measures are used to calculate the rate of inflation. In 2008, the then Minister of Finance and Personnel said, on the basis of the Executive's underlying assumptions, that the rate of inflation was around 2.7%. Last year, we were in a situation of very low inflation. Indeed, there may have been deflation at some point during the year. This time around, the rate of inflation is between 2% and 3% — perhaps closer to 3%.

That gives us an indication of the rise in inflation that has happened, and the Executive should seek to follow the example that has been set where the non-domestic rate has been struck at 2.7%.

I will move on to my other points, because I have still a fair bit of material to get through. The point has been made about councils, some of which, potentially, will impose rises of 6% or 7%. The fact that people in households look at their overall rates bill without differentiating between the rate set by the Executive and the rate set by councils lessens, to an extent, the effect of any populist approach that the Executive might take.

I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. The most sensible thing to do is to encourage councils to strike their rate at in or around 3%, the rate of inflation, as my council has done, and for the Executive to follow suit, so that the rates rise in tandem and we do not have a situation in which one is played off against the other to determine which is the better and which is the worst.

I will respond to some of the comments that were made earlier. The policy has been dressed up as a virtue that forms part of the Executive's response to the economic downturn. Their policy, of course, predates any talk of an economic recession, given that it was voted through as an Executive and Assembly

policy back in February 2008. Therefore, the Executive's response is not a response to the recession; it is at the core of their policy.

Even in the context of a recession, freezing rates may well be helpful. In reducing the cost pressures on businesses and households, it may allow money that is not given to government to be spent elsewhere in the economy and to keep demand alive in difficult times. That is a rational economic argument, although it may be undermined by people choosing to save rather than to spend their money. There are a number of points that must be raised in contrast to that. Today, as we look at things, the Executive are prioritising households over businesses. That is not much help to businesses, because the regional business rate is being increased while the household rate is being frozen. If what is being proposed is a measure to respond to the downturn, surely logic dictates that the Executive should do the reverse — impose a 2·7% rise in the household rate and freeze, in cash terms, the rates burden on businesses.

There is very little evidence of increasing default by domestic ratepayers. The same persistent problems are in the system as they always have been. There has been an upsurge in the difficulties experienced by businesses in paying their rates. The argument, therefore, is that the priorities are the wrong way round. That said, the introduction of the small business rates relief scheme, even though it is still not the most efficient way of helping the business sector in our economy, is of more help to businesses, particularly those that are operating on the margins, and it allows those big companies, such as Tesco, that can afford to pay rates and to make their contribution to society, to pay their fair share. A single approach treats all businesses alike and does not make any distinction between the two.

The approach that has been taken to supporting businesses freezes the situation in Northern Ireland. We are missing the opportunity to rebalance our economy by taking the revenue and using it to reinvest and to do things differently, and to allow our economy to be placed on a much more sustainable footing in the longer term. What is being proposed is not, perhaps, the most efficient and effective response to the economic downturn.

There are opportunity costs in the form of lost revenue that could be used elsewhere in the

economy, or, indeed, if we got the opportunity to have tax-varying powers and were to look at the issue of a differential rate of corporation tax. Increases in taxes elsewhere in the system may have to be deployed in order to lower taxes elsewhere and to focus on taxes that are economically proven to have a much bigger impact on facilitating a step change in our economic situation. It is in that context that bodies such as the CBI, IOD and the new think tank that was launched last week are focusing on the importance of corporation tax.

Also, in their documents, those bodies comment on the approach taken by the Executive to domestic finances through the regional rate and water charges. There is a sobering reality in how the business community views the policy that has been adopted and presented by the Executive as being good for the economy.

12.45 pm

I want to make a number of points with respect to households. Freezing the regional rate is regressive with respect to its impact on households because it helps the better off at the expense of those who are worse off. That is an economic fact, which virtually every economist would stand over. Indeed, those economists who have commented have made the point about this being a regressive subsidy. The regional rate is tied to property values, and property taxes are a blunt instrument. There is some relationship to the ability to pay, but it could be better. Nevertheless, the greater the value of a property, the greater the bill will be.

By contrast, there are people in society who do not pay rates or who pay relatively small amounts of rates and have a disproportionate dependency on public services, particularly the National Health Service. Those services will be cut as a consequence of the current financial situation, and we will see deterioration in the quality of public services. Such cuts will have to be defended.

In addition, there are those who want to see new investment, whether it is in schools or transport infrastructure. That is not going to happen: due to lost opportunities, the money is not there. Some people can make an argument about those who are at the margins of society and who will be affected adversely by the policies being pursued on the regional rate and by any potential rise. The Assembly has to engage with that argument, and surely the

answer is to fix the system of taxation, remove the anomalies, and make it better reflect the ability to pay.

The Executive have introduced a number of reliefs in recent years, which I welcome. I argue that those reliefs make a bigger difference to people at the margins than a freeze in the rates, because for every person at the margins of society, there are many others who can easily afford to pay more, and who are happy to pay more, because they believe in the social contract; they believe in helping those in society who are less fortunate; they believe in being generous; and they believe in making a contribution. There is a large economic deadweight in the policy being pursued by the Executive.

Ultimately, an inflation-based rise will not have a dramatic impact on households. It will not cripple people. An inflation-based rise would amount to pennies per week for the average household in Northern Ireland. The average household would have to pay no more than 30p or 40p a week: that puts the rise into perspective. The overall effect is that it can make a difference, a small difference perhaps, but a difference nonetheless, in avoiding some of the tough decisions that have to be made about cuts over the weeks and months to come.

I have two other concerns. The first is about the relationship between the Assembly and the UK Treasury. The Assembly has to be conscious that the tax burden per head in Northern Ireland, including income tax and the equivalent of council tax, is lower than the UK average. It could be argued that the gap is widening through the decisions that we are taking today. There may be good reasons for that differential given that we are less affluent than most other regions in the UK. However, our relationship with the Treasury is sensitive, and it is important that we achieve balance and do not push the boundaries too far. If the Assembly gives out the message that it is giving more tax breaks to local people rather than investing money in services and trying to change our society in order to rebalance our economy, we have to wonder what the Treasury's reaction will be when we plead to be treated as a special case. The question will be: how is it that we are so badly off when we can afford to take a different approach to taxation than our fellow citizens in the rest of the UK? If we see a reopening of the Barnett formula, that risk may well be exposed.

My second point is about feeding into unrealistic expectations. We are proposing to freeze the domestic regional rate for the third year running. For how long can that be sustained? How long will those who criticise the Alliance Party today be able to sustain their position of freezing the regional rate? Can that be done indefinitely, or will there come the day when a future Finance Minister backed by a future Executive tells the Assembly that we have to address revenue raising in order to address our financial situation? The same logic applies to the deferment of water charges, because we cannot expect that situation to be sustainable either.

It is disappointing that only the Alliance Party will make such comments today. What we are saying is far from radical; indeed, it is the hallmark of a responsible approach. It is consistent with the approach that any other Government in the world would take to address the situation. I am not identified as being on the left wing, and certainly my party colleagues would not place me there. I see myself as being right of centre and someone who supports free enterprise and the market. However, I see what the Executive are seeking to do as completely illogical and well outside the mainstream. I cannot get my head round why those with a different ideology would support an Order that is the antithesis of social justice and that will benefit the better off in society rather than those who depend on public services.

Mr Hamilton: I will not disappoint Dr Farry in respect of his basic guiding philosophy on the issue. I am committed to keeping our rates bills as low as possible, and that commitment is shared by colleagues on this side of the House and other Members. We must try to help people with their cost base in the limited ways that we can. However, we must bear in mind that the Assembly has limited levers available to it to assist people with their incomes. We get precious little opportunity to support a freeze on any sort of cost and to keep more of people's money in their pockets. Therefore, I fully support the Rates (Regional Rates) Order.

My philosophy or guiding principle on the issue is to try to keep rates bills as low as possible. Sometimes, we cannot keep those bills as low as we would like, but we always endeavour to keep them as low as possible. I have tried to take that philosophy into local government. I declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council and chairman of that council's

rates subcommittee. We think that we have been one of the more responsible councils this year. In the face of the difficulties that all councils face, our district rates increase is 2.98% this year. All Members, including the Minister, will appreciate that local government faces difficulties that are particular to local government. That 2.98% is the lowest percentage increase that Ards Borough Council ratepayers have faced for 13 years. I want a philosophy of trying to keep rates as low as possible taken forward in the Assembly.

I am proud — proud is the right word — of the Executive's overall rates strategy. There is no point in considering only the current situation. One must consider the rates mess that the Executive inherited in 2007. Rates was a hot-button issue for many people because the rates system changed from being based on historical rental values to capital values. There were outcries up and down the country about the rates bills that people faced. Some people faced 50% increases, and there were few winners at the other end of the scale.

We inherited a policy that had been driven through by direct rule Ministers, and the warning from the current Minister of Finance and Personnel about the situation is apt. I could speak about a catalogue of hundreds of issues, but I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you would call me out of order. However, on the pertinent issue of our rates, people who would happily take us back to direct rule, and to aloof and unaccountable direct rule Ministers, would do well to remember the 19% increase in the regional rate in one year and, indeed, the 60% or 65% increase over the last five years of direct rule before the restoration of the Assembly.

We inherited an unpopular mess of a rating system to which there was massive opposition. I am sure that other Members would concur with that, and it was an issue that I heard mentioned on the doorsteps in 2007. I, therefore, welcomed the rating review that was launched almost instantaneously by the then Finance Minister, Peter Robinson. That focused on delivering a fairer rates system, with an emphasis on reliefs and allowances. We have cause to be proud of the overall outworking of that strategy, not just on regional rates. I am sure that the 30% cap on industrial rates has helped to protect hundreds and hundreds of jobs in the critical manufacturing sector.

In addition, many people are in for a pleasant surprise as a result of the small business rates relief scheme, which the Finance Minister finalised just before Christmas. A lot of small businesses have no idea about the benefit that the scheme will deliver to them. A small businessman — although he is not small in stature — who runs a couple of shops in my local area, asked me what his rates bill will look like on the basis of the rate that the council has struck and the regional rate. I was able to tell him that his net annual value meant that he would get back between £250 and £300 on one of his properties, which would mean a reduction in his rates bill. That made a real difference to him, and he was over the moon. Many in the small business sector are unaware of the benefit that they will receive courtesy of the policies that have been driven through the Assembly by the Executive and this Finance Minister.

The freeze on the non-domestic regional rate last year has helped in a similar way. For some businesses, that may mean a difference of only a few hundred pounds — I believe that the average is between £300 and £400 — but for the sort of businesses that the freeze is targeting, for example, small retail in disadvantaged areas, that could mean the difference between staying in business or not, keeping someone employed or not, or reducing someone's hours or not. Hopefully, we will see in our constituencies the benefit of the emphasis on post offices.

The lone pensioner allowance has been immensely beneficial to those in receipt of it. The value of that allowance is now well over £2.5 million, and it helps those who receive it to the tune of hundreds of pounds on average. That allowance was brought in by this Executive, and has benefited some of the most vulnerable in society. Other initiatives and interventions include the green rate rebate scheme, which not only helps people with a rates rebate, but encourages investment in more energy-efficient homes. Those who qualify for the rates deferral scheme by virtue of their age can put off their rates bill and push it into their estate. Even though the Assembly has limited scope, initiatives and interventions through the rates system have provided a lot of help.

Turning to the Rates (Regional Rates) Order, there is, effectively, a reduction, in real terms, in non-domestic rates, and that is positive. Dr Farry

talked about the emphasis being on households rather than businesses. I do not recognise that. One cannot look at what the Assembly has done on rates and come to that judgement, not least because of the cap on industrial rates, which Dr Farry has also consistently opposed. One must look at the industrial rates cap and the small business rates relief scheme, which I think that he also opposed.

Dr Farry: I supported that.

Mr Hamilton: We found at least one thing that the Member supports.

1.00 pm

Those are helpful interventions, but business overall is not helped simply through rates. I am keen on infrastructure investment. Despite the difficult budgetary pressures with which the Minister has to deal in the next financial year, including the required reduction of some £370 million, there will be record investment in our infrastructure, which will help small, medium and large businesses right across the Province. Even though last year saw record investment and this year will be equally high, some people want investment in infrastructure to infinity and beyond. Back in the real world, however, that intervention has been helpful. The Executive have also taken other measures to help our businesses.

I very much welcome the domestic regional rate freeze for the third year of this budgetary period. Again — I speak with my local government hat on — when that is added to the lowest percentage increase in 13 years in the Ards area, it means that the average ratepayer in Ards will see an increase in their monthly bill of only 90p. In the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we can rightly be proud of that.

The Member who spoke previously said that we cannot make a virtue of those interventions because a lot of them were introduced years ago. The fact that they were brought in at the start of this Assembly term shows the timeliness of doing that. In fact, if we had not taken and implemented those sorts of initiatives years ago, they are exactly the sort of measures that people would beg us to take now. They would now beg us to bring in a small business rates relief scheme, freeze the domestic rate and cap industrial rates. The small business rates relief scheme was announced in December 2008, and it took nearly until

December 2009 to introduce it. The time to respond is so long that interventions need to be made early. If we had not taken that action, people would be knocking down the door of this Assembly and looking for us to take some of the very measures that we have taken, including freezing the domestic regional rate, which is what we will do today.

As Mr Weir and others said, it is not as if increasing the regional rate, which is what Dr Farry and his party advocate, would bring in oodles of cash and fill in the £370 million worth of reductions that are required for the next financial year. I suggest that even an inflationary rise would be mere tokenism. We could not even think for a second of advocating the sort of 140% increase that it would take to fill entirely that £370 million worth of adjustments.

I also take issue with the comments that were made about other Governments taking action in response to the downturn such as increasing costs on households or businesses. That may well be true, but, as Mr Weir pointed out, we are not comparing apples with apples. Doing what Dr Farry suggested would compare national Governments to a regional Assembly. Those national Governments deal with huge Budget deficits, which are crippling in the case of the Irish Republic. They have had to take certain actions that we do not. We are differently funded, and we are looking at essentially different problems. The problems with which the Minister has to deal in respect of next year's Budget are largely self-inflicted as a result of the decision on water charges and the settlement on equal pay.

I do not accept either that people in Northern Ireland somehow sit in splendid isolation and that they have not suffered in any way. Through our work, we all know that people in Northern Ireland have suffered. They have suffered also from national tax increases. National Insurance contributions have gone up, which harms people who work and the businesses that pay their contribution.

The 50p tax rate may not affect too many people, although I am sure that some people, such as those whom Dr Farry mentioned, would, in the interests of social justice, be happy to pay higher taxes and rates. Indeed, maybe we should employ Dr Farry to find people who would happily pay more rates and taxes. I am not sure whether such a scheme would finance itself.

Although he seems to know people who would be happy to pay increased taxes, that does not reflect my experience.

At the other end of the scale, there have been losers as a result of the shambolic changes to the 10p tax rate. Even though VAT came down temporarily, it has gone up, and we now see posturing between the Tories and the Labour Party about who will get to a 20% VAT rate quicker. Indeed, extending VAT to other goods and services has been mooted. In addition, in the April 2009 Budget, duty on fuel, beer, wine and spirits was increased. I do not accept that, just because we did not introduce the nationally levied increases about which Dr Farry spoke, Northern Ireland people are not paying them and contributing.

I have always taken the approach, which I know the Minister shares, that, before we think seriously about increasing costs for householders or businesses here, we should think about efficiency. We should ask ourselves whether government here is as efficient as it could be. Until we can answer that question positively or can say that we are on the right track, it is dangerous and difficult to increase the costs that Northern Ireland people have to bear.

Just to prove that economists cannot agree, as if the contrast between the 20 and 60 economists is not bad enough, Dr Farry cited ERINI's work. ERINI submitted a paper, 'The State of Public Finances' to the Finance Committee, which stated:

"The argument against increasing revenues is partly based on the current economic climate which makes increasing the burden on businesses and individuals unattractive. In addition there is the practical difficulty of the weakness of the tax base. Bringing in any substantial amount from the Regional Rate, for example, would require an annual increase in double digits."

We have already talked about that. The paper continues with four key words: "These are legitimate concerns". They are legitimate concerns. Given where we are financially, which everyone would agree is not where we want to be, and that we are doing what we are doing, people, whether householders or those in business, expect their Assembly to be doing exactly what Peter Weir said: making a difference through devolution. The Assembly is about addressing local problems with local solutions and being responsive to local people's

needs, which the Rates (Regional Rates) Order will do.

Mr McQuillan: I rise as a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, a Member for East Londonderry and a member of Coleraine Borough Council. I am pleased that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has once again frozen the regional rate and that the Assembly has not imposed an increase on Northern Ireland ratepayers. His announcement demonstrates that the Assembly and my party are doing all that they can to relieve the financial burden on homeowners and businesses, and the Minister must be praised for that. Unfortunately, some local councils have increased rates, some by a considerable amount. However, those rate increases are nothing to do with the Assembly. Although many councils have limited their increase, which must be welcomed, others have passed on a substantial rise to ratepayers.

Let us face it: any increase could be a matter of some people keeping their home or not or of a business being able to continue trading or to keep on staff. In government, as society faces higher living costs, we must do all that we can to help Joe Public. We must make savings and pass them on to the general public. The public mood is one of anger, frustration and unhappiness. Despite media reports that the UK is out of recession, as people struggle to find jobs, pay bills, get mortgages or live a better life without their outgoings rising above their income and limiting their disposable income, the effects are yet to be seen.

This year, there will be a general election, and, if the Tories — their partners are sitting to my right — get into power, life will not become any easier. I understand that there are hard decisions to make, and whoever forms the next Government in Westminster will have to make some hard decisions and impose cuts to certain services. However, will the Tories protect front line services, such as education and health? No, they will not. They will be ruthless; they do not care because their party does not reflect the social composition of the majority of the UK. Cuts should be made where they can be, but essential services should be protected. Nevertheless, I commend the motion to the House.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank all the Members who have taken part in this important debate for doing so. To a certain extent, it has been a bit of a rerun of some of

the lengthy discussions that we have had over the past couple of weeks on the Budget etc, but, as always, it has been interesting. A wide range of views has been expressed — some more controversial than others — and some Members were prepared to stick their neck out more than others. Nevertheless, it has been a useful debate.

The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 gives effect to decisions that have been made as part of the Budget process. The aim, at least of this part of the Budget, was to strike a balance between the needs of ratepayers during these challenging economic times and ensuring that public finances are sufficient to cover the priorities that we have set for ourselves. Some Members referred to ERINI, and, as Mr Hamilton pointed out, even in its evidence to the Committee, ERINI indicated that that was a legitimate area to look at.

We are trying to strike a balance in all these things. Some people have argued that we have not gone far enough, and some may even think that we have gone too far, but the central message is that, outside the Chamber, there is now a range of critics. Some of them are political. They are not in here, there is little likelihood of them getting in here, and, therefore, they just want to tear the place down. Some of them are scribblers who have to find something controversial to say in the newspapers and on the airwaves every day. That is their way of keeping audience numbers up, and it is always a cheap way to have a pop at politicians. Among a number of those people, there appears to be a view that we would be far better off under direct rule, and that has excited some of the population.

As a number of Members have said today, we could go through a whole catalogue of things, such as a 19% increase in rates or budgets being underspent with the result that money goes back to the Treasury and is not, therefore, available to the people in Northern Ireland. That was the experience under direct rule. For those who talk about going back to the balmy days of direct rule, when Ministers from Westminster came here and people did not have to listen to the squabbling of local politicians in the Assembly, let me remind them of some of the consequences of that scenario. Double-digit increases in rates were imposed, and, despite the fact that Mr Farry knows people who are happy to pay more tax, as Mr Hamilton pointed

out, we did not come across too many of them when we were going round the doors before the previous Assembly elections. I want to talk about the people of north Down, because they may be a class apart, but I will do that later when I am responding to some of the points made.

Let us put some reality into the discussion. Despite the shortcomings — there are shortcomings in the Assembly — and despite the difficulties of trying to work in a coalition with a wide range of diverse views, at least, at the end of the day, we can come, sometimes painfully, sometimes slowly and sometimes with a lot of contentious debate, to a view that tries to tailor the decisions here to what we, as locally elected representatives, perceive to be the needs of the population.

1.15 pm

I want to turn now to points that were made during the debate and say a few words on some of them. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel indicated that the decision was backed by a majority vote in the Committee. I looked at the decision, and I am pleased to note it, although I believe that two Committee members voted against the Order. The Ulster Unionist Party did not vote for the Order in Committee. I note that Mr McNarry has put on record today that the Ulster Unionist Party is happy to support the Order that is before the Assembly. He may want to provide an explanation in an intervention.

The Committee Chairperson also pointed out that evidence given to the Committee showed that, effectively, given all the allowances that are in place, there is a freeze on the non-domestic regional rate as well as the regional rate, because the additional revenue raised is small. I will return to that issue later when I discuss Mr Farry's contribution.

The Chairperson talked about her party's preference for a local income tax based on ability to pay, rather than a property tax levied through the rating system. That is a debate for another day, and I do not want to get into it now. However, it is wrong to imply that the Department has not sought to examine people's ability to pay before making a decision on rates. The rating system contains the housing rebate and the low income rate relief scheme, which helps low-income households. Indeed, in many cases it gives them, effectively, a 100% reduction in rates. On top of that, the

Executive have introduced protection for people who are on a low income, particularly pensioners, through the lone pensioner scheme. On Friday, in my own constituency, I received a presentation from the LPS for community groups and leaders, housing associations and residents' associations. The Department has tried to make the lone pensioner scheme accessible and easy to apply for, without people having to fill in long forms etc. That has been an attempt to respond to a particular group of people who have difficulties.

Mr F McCann: That point is crucial. I raised the issue with the LPS representatives when they appeared before the Finance Committee last Wednesday. Often, when statutory authorities want to reach people, they take it only so far and then leave it. When changes are made to the system or new ways of doing things are proposed, it is crucial to tap into local communities as a matter of course to ensure that everybody realises and understands what the Assembly is trying to do.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I agree; it is important. Some complex changes that are made are not understood. People do not understand their entitlements. I have had meetings in different parts of my constituency for people who are leaders in their communities to come to and get the message. The LPS has been more than willing to give presentations to community groups and public representatives who wish to engage with communities, residents' groups and individuals in their areas. The Member makes an important point: it is important that that information is disseminated.

To date, as a result of an Executive scheme, £3.4 million of rate reliefs have been made available to lone pensioners who are over 70 years of age. In addition, we increased the savings limit for pensioners. There is a disregard of £10,000, and people are allowed to have savings of up to £50,000 before becoming ineligible for the scheme. Therefore, we sought to deal with people's ability to pay.

Mr Weir was one of several Members who talked about the impact on the business community and what had been done for the non-domestic sector. If Members study the range of measures that have been taken, such as the 30% cap for manufacturing businesses; the introduction of small business relief for next year, which will exempt about £9 million of rates; or the

freeze on last year's non-domestic rate, they will see that much has been done to assist the business community with rates.

Mr McNarry raised a number of points, the first of which was also raised by Mr Farry. Mr McNarry said that it was all very well to freeze rates this year, but he asked, quite reasonably, what would happen in the future. One of the reasons that we made the rate changes over a three-year period was to give certainty to people. The worst thing in the world, as Mr McNarry will know, is for businesses to coast along with a rate freeze only to be whopped suddenly with a huge increase. The Member, therefore, asked a legitimate question.

I also want to bring in Mr Farry's point that we cannot go on like that for ever. The last thing in the world that I want to suggest is that we can go on like that for ever. In my opening speech, I said that I did not have to remind Members that public finances were tight and that, although the debate should not revisit decisions that have been made, we were at the limit of what is affordable. I am trying to be as forthright as possible. We cannot keep on doing the same thing, but, in addressing Mr McNarry's question, there are four principles to be considered. First, any decision for the future must seek to achieve a balance between what we take from ratepayers and the need for public finance. We cannot lump the entire burden on ratepayers and tell them that public services must be financed; neither can we disregard public services and exempt taxpayers or ratepayers from rate increases. It is a balancing act. Secondly, I do not believe that we can or will go back to the sudden double-digit increases of the past, regardless of the situation. Thirdly, in making those decisions, we must try to inject a degree of certainty that will allow us to provide long-term projections, rather than imposing year-on-year increases that hit people suddenly. Fourthly, I remain of the view, as I said in the House before, that we must ensure that we extract as much in efficiencies from the system as we can. That includes considering how efficiency savings can be made in this place.

Ultimately, it will be a decision for the Executive, but those are the types of principles that I expect them to consider. Given the uncertainties in public finance, I am sure that the Member does not expect me to guess at a figure. Those four principles for making the decision should at least ensure that it will not be overly onerous

on the taxpayers or mean a sudden increase for which they cannot plan. The application of those four principles should also ensure that the decision will not be made in isolation from actions that Ministers and Committees should be taking to ensure that money is not extracted from people's pockets without some consideration of how it is being used.

Mr McNarry's second question was about the reform of local government. I know that, as a result of a paper from PricewaterhouseCoopers, there had been some concern about the amalgamation of councils and what that may do for the taxes and local rates for households. That is something that the Environment Minister and I will discuss. I have said that I do not believe that we should oversee a situation that creates sudden and huge increases in rates for people in one council area rather than another. We will look at how that is managed, how the cost of RPA is financed and how the adjustment is made where there are huge differences in rates between one area and another. A paper on that will come to the Executive. We have not discussed that at the Executive, so I do not have the solution. However, as I am on record as saying, I do not want to oversee a situation in which the reform process leads to huge rates increases in the way in which the paper suggested.

Mr McNarry's last point was very valid. There is nothing that irks people more than some people paying while others do not; it really does not matter what walk of life you are talking about. Mr McNarry pointed out that, although LPS set a target for 98% rate collection, it has not met that target. That is the reality, and I am not going to run away from it. Indeed, LPS has missed that target quite significantly — it has achieved 91% rate collection as opposed to 98%.

When Nigel Dodds occupied the position of Finance Minister, one of the reasons why he brought PEDU in to look at LPS was some of the issues that have been described. LPS was not, perhaps, performing as well as it should have been. Recommendations have been made that should help that performance. However, we must also recognise that collecting any kind of money during a recession — especially one that has hit a lot of businesses — will be difficult. It makes it difficult to achieve the 98% target, which was set at a time when the economy was booming, rather than in the current situation. However, as I have said to officials, if the performance of LPS is not improving, we have to look at other

ways of collecting debt. If LPS is not up to it, I am happy to revisit that, because I do not think that we can allow a situation to continue in which people feel that they can get off with not paying rates. All these issues have to be borne in mind: the fact that an effective programme of work has been put in place for LPS; the fact that we are hit by the impact of the recession; and the fact that I have made a commitment to seek to ensure that that target is met.

Mr O'Loan pointed out and confirmed what I just said, which is that, as far as rate collection is concerned, we try to look at people's ability to pay and to ensure that all the various allowances etc are in place to reflect that. The situation is not perfect, and we all know of constituents for whom that is the case. That is especially the case for pensioners, for example, who have some private pension and are sitting on the margins or for people who are in what are regarded as low-income families but are just pushed over the threshold. With any such system, there will always be people who fall into such categories.

I reject Mr Farry's suggestion that rate freezes are of benefit only to the rich. They are not. Those who just fall over the threshold and are liable for the full rates bill even though they are and would be regarded as not well off will benefit fully from the rate freeze. We have introduced measures to deal with that, and, as I have pointed out in the Assembly time and time again, in trying to at least target the groups who are not so well off, we have probably created an awful lot of work for LPS.

1.30 pm

Mr O'Loan and the Chairman of the Committee made the point that, as far as business rates are concerned, there is an effective freeze. We have tried to redistribute the increase and to target small and medium-sized enterprises — small businesses and manufacturing.

Mr O'Loan also made the point that councils sometimes depended on our freezing the regional rate so that they could hike up their rates and it would not look too bad. I am sure that councils would not be so cynical. I remember that the opposite argument was made when I was a member of Belfast City Council during direct rule, when we were getting high, double-digit increases. Councillors used to argue that it did not matter whether they held their rates down, as central government would

use that as an excuse to stick its rates up. It works both ways. My argument is that councils ought to look — just as we have to — at their expenditure to see whether it is necessary to set such high levels. However, many councils must be commended for the way in which they have shown some restraint.

I come now to Mr Farry. I always enjoy his contributions because he is not afraid to be controversial, and I can always be sure that he will challenge the orthodoxy around some issues. He describes himself as a kamikaze politician, prepared to say unpopular things about public finances and raising taxes. Maybe, as I said earlier, it is because he represents a unique constituency where the affluent households in North Down are simply overjoyed to pay their taxes. He said that people are happy to pay more. My constituents in East Antrim do not share that joy about taxation.

Mr Weir: Does the Minister accept that not everyone in North Down is entirely happy to have to pay more money?

Dr Farry: Speak for yourself.

Mr Weir: I am certainly not happy to be paying more. If Mr Farry has a great pool of people who are keen to pay more, maybe he could extract that money from them. I do not know whether he is calling at Alliance doors in North Down, but at the doors that I call at in North Down, I have not been inundated with people wanting to pay higher rates.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Maybe Alliance Party supporters are so well off that they do not need to worry about local taxation, and that may be reflected in Mr Farry's position. However, there is an important philosophical difference, which Mr Hamilton referred to in his contribution, between those of us who believe that we must provide public services and those of us who believe that we should endeavour to try to leave as much money as possible with individuals because they know how best to spend their money, rather than having it spent by the public sector and politicians. We have a philosophical difference: Mr Farry falls on one side of that argument where he believes in the spending of money in the public sector and in decisions being made by politicians and that that, on balance, is better than leaning on the side where individuals would have the right to make decisions about how they spend their money.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. This is becoming an interesting philosophical discussion. First, I regard my remarks as being orthodox and everyone else's as being unorthodox. That is the way that the Alliance Party sees it, and what it feels is mainstream. Nevertheless, I concur with a lot of what the Minister said about giving people the ability to spend their money as they wish, but there is a philosophical difference. I think that the DUP is being straight and that it is at a different level on the spectrum with regard to keeping costs down and the money that is raised from people.

I come from a right-of-centre perspective, yet, bizarrely, everyone in the Chamber seems to have lurched to the right and now agrees with the DUP on the issue. I congratulate the Minister on convincing his Executive colleagues to take that route.

In North Down and everywhere else in our society, there are people who recognise their wider responsibilities to society. Everyone is reluctant to pay tax, but many accept that it is a necessary evil, and that one must make contributions to look after the interests of society as a whole, whether to fund national defence or to look after the welfare of vulnerable people. People want fairness in taxation, but there are those who are well off, have a social conscience and are willing to contribute in line with their income. The Executive are going off on a different tangent to the people in respect of public services.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his intervention. That leads me to the next point that I wanted to make about his contribution.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I was trying to answer the point that Dr Farry made, but I will give way.

Mr McNarry: I realise that, but I sensed that the Minister was going to move on, and I was looking for an opportunity to introduce an additional point. I hope that the Minister agrees that there are times when it is important for us to manage as much of a consensus as possible to show that we care. I am pleased with the tone of today's debate, and I hope that that will be picked up by the commentators who give Members a rough time on other issues.

The Minister, when quoting Mr Hamilton, said that there should be an endeavour to leave as much money as possible with individuals. All Members will agree with that.

I want to raise the plight of carers, which is an issue in North Down as much as any other constituency. The Minister is well aware of their plight, and I have, on several occasions, raised the issue of how we could provide them with rates relief. Carers face many hardships and problems, which, when added to the care that they give, make them more vulnerable. I am aware that carers' representatives will be appearing before the Committee for Finance and Personnel in the not too distant future. However, I want to take the opportunity to express my deep appreciation to a departmental official to whom I spoke, who is in the Officials' Box. That official has been most helpful in trying to find a solution to the issue.

Without interfering in what the Minister wanted to say to Dr Farry, will he give some encouragement during his winding-up speech that he and his Department are open to representations that could provide viable rates relief for carers?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will respond to Mr McNarry's point now, because I may forget later. Mr McNarry has been consistent in making representations to me on the issue of carers. He raised that issue during my first visit to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and I indicated that I was quite happy for him to sit down with departmental officials. I am glad that he has found that engagement profitable and useful, and that that representation is to be made to the Committee.

However, I do not want to give the impression that there is an easy solution. One of the messages that continually comes from LPS officials is that the greater number of reliefs that are introduced to the system, the more complicated it becomes, both for those who may benefit and for the administration of the system. Discussions have been held about how long a carer must be a carer, how individuals can be verified as carers, and how a system of additional administration, which checks, monitors and works out what benefits a person is entitled to, and when and how they are entitled to them, could be built up. It is, maybe, easier for long-term carers than for people who are caring for short periods. I imagine that those

are the kinds of things that the Committee will want to tease out when it looks at any scheme that might be suggested.

I do not want to give the impression that, just because I am sympathetic — probably many Members are sympathetic — it means that there is an easy solution to the issue or that there will not be costs involved in relation to rates collection, benefit payments, and monitoring and checking, etc. I wish the Member all the best; he has been consistent in his position, and I am sure that there will be an interesting discussion when it comes to the Committee.

Mr Farry talked about the fact that we were, perhaps, not achieving the right balance between revenue raising and cuts. Indeed, he said that most Administrations have a far greater balance than we have in Northern Ireland. Mr Hamilton partly answered that point. A number of Members made the point that even if we were to go down the road of raising revenue, huge increases in rates would be required to deal with the kinds of efficiencies and savings that we are seeking, otherwise all that we would be doing would be making a token gesture.

The Member has suggested that an increase of 140% to try to finance the whole gap would be reckless. The 19% increase that occurred under direct rule was reckless. He has suggested that a modest inflationary increase every year might be reasonable. However, the inflationary increase for this year would raise in the region of £15 million. He may well argue that at least that would finance one particular service or another, but the point is that we would still have to heavily emphasise the need for savings and efficiencies.

On the other hand, the Member recognises the microeconomic impact of downward tax adjustments, because, later in his speech, he defended some of the actions that have been taken in relation to businesses. Some of those micro-changes — such as the £9 million for small business relief, which he has generously said that he supported — help individual businesses, but, equally, at a time when we are in recession and people are out of jobs, losing overtime, and do not have the same opportunities for part-time employment, the micro-changes of rates freezes for domestic households can be important. I submit to the Assembly that they are important to households across Northern Ireland. Therefore, despite

what Mr Farry said about us not having the balance that other Administrations have and about it being wrong to put all the emphasis on reductions in spending by Departments, I think that, on balance, it is still the right decision to make, especially in the current circumstances. I think that he may want me to give way.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for giving way. He acknowledged my point that the revenue that could be raised, although small, could be used for some discrete project, whether for mental health, capital spending in education, relief for carers, if that is possible, or funding a scheme similar to the small business relief scheme. That gives us the choice. The Executive may well have one pet project that they want to pursue.

We may have a slight philosophical difference on the point that he makes about easing the cost pressures on households, but I challenge him on the economic evidence. What is the evidence that keeping that cost low will have an impact on creating a proportionate increase in demand?

Will the Minister also recognise the fact that that approach simply sustains the current economic conditions and comes at an opportunity cost in that the money cannot be invested elsewhere in the economy, which would allow us to change the underlying dynamics of the economy and make it more competitive?

1.45 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raised a point on the impact that a rates freeze has on the economy and about whether it leads to increased demand. My point is not so much that that stimulates demand in the economy as it is that it helps people who find the situation difficult because of the changes that the recession has made to their family income. It is an important safety valve for such households.

The Member's other point was on the impact that a rates rise would have on public services and other areas of saving. As I have said consistently in the Assembly, the greatest way to make an impact on public services is to examine how we spend the money that already goes to public services. It must be put into perspective that £15 million in taxes would be made from raising the regional rate at the rate of inflation but that £790 million has been made available over the Budget period through

efficiency savings. That is the place in which we will drive for an impact.

The Member asked for the evidence that a rates freeze has had an impact. I am glad that he supported the small business rates relief scheme, which will come into effect in April 2010 and will save £9 million. Given that he recognises the fact that that £9 million will have an impact on small businesses, he must also accept that the same principle applies even to the modest savings that households will make by the domestic rate being frozen. It is not the amount of savings that is important but the impact that it has on the overheads of individual householders and businesses at a time of recession.

The Member also said that the proposal is regressive in some way. That statement contains many assumptions. He feels that the proposal is regressive because, at a time when public services are being cut, a rates freeze will benefit households that can afford to pay that tax and which should, therefore, have money taken off them. His argument is that the households that can afford to pay the tax are well off and that the public service cuts will affect only the less well off, thus making the proposal regressive. That is a simplistic argument, especially given the fact that I have already pointed out that many —

Mr Ford: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me finish the point that I am developing, because it might answer the question.

Many of those households are just above the threshold, and, therefore, a tax increase on them would be regressive and have a huge impact on their budget. It would hit their low income at 100%. As the Member knows, not every penny that is spent in the public service benefits only the less well off. He mentioned transport, and many would argue that the money that is spent on roads benefits car owners, who are better off. Middle-class people tend to do better out of the education system, so money that is spent on schools can be said to benefit them. Well-off people need operations as well as people on lower incomes, so the same argument can be made about spending on hospitals. The idea that taxes hit the rich and that spending cuts hit the poor is a bit simplistic, and the Member knows it. Assumptions are built into his argument.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for giving way eventually. He describes the argument of my colleague Stephen Farry as “simplistic”. Perhaps he will agree that his use of the word “only” instead of “disproportionately” certainly presented the argument as simplistic. I wish to take up a specific point that the Minister made about the Health Service. The simple fact is that poorer people make more use of the Health Service than people who are well off. The Minister was absolutely wrong on the key argument that he attempted to use to answer the point that he thought that I would make and that my colleague had made.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not think that I am wrong about that.

Mr Ford: Ask Michael.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It depends on the area of the Health Service in which the money is being spent. A point that has been made time and time again in the Chamber is that a disproportionate amount of any increased money received by the Health Service is spent on administration. I do not want to start another row with the Health Minister on the issue. However, the Nuffield report also highlights the fact that, as a result of the additional money that has been made available to the Health Service over the past number of years — an increase of 6·8% every year — the differential between the number of administrators in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom increased from 70% to 140%. Surely the Member is not saying that money spent in that way helps the poor. In fact, given the bonuses and salaries payable to some levels of administrative staff in the Health Service, some people may argue that that money helps people who are rich or better off. Therefore, before the Member goes down that route, he should consider where in the Health Service that money is being spent.

I must say that Mr Farry always makes interesting points in debates such as this. He said that he found it strange that we were prioritising households over businesses. His point implies that all that the Executive and the Assembly did for business was to offer rates relief and that the only impact of that was the limited amount of tax that we could take out of the economy. However, that must be balanced against the range of other measures. First, we introduced the small business rates relief

scheme, which has, in effect, frozen rates. Secondly, we spent money on promoting the economy through supporting infrastructure, providing help to firms through selective assistance, retraining workers and assisting universities to skill workers. If Members balance those actions, they will see that, once again, Mr Farry's argument is fairly simplistic.

Mr Farry asked how long the freeze on regional rates could be maintained. It would be totally wrong to say that it can go on for ever, because that would only come back to bite us. However, Members should not forget that the decision to freeze the regional rate was sold as our response to the current economic recession and the pressures on householders' incomes. I can tell that another intervention is coming, because Mr Farry frowned when I said that, so I will try to anticipate his question. The decision to freeze the regional rate at the beginning of the three-year period was a reaction to the huge rates increases of previous years. The freeze was maintained because of the impact of the recession. I hope that that answers Mr Farry's question.

I have already dealt with many of the issues that Mr Hamilton raised. He spoke about philosophical differences between the impact under direct rule and the impact under the devolved institutions. He also mentioned the help that is available to businesses. I have just reiterated his point that we help businesses in many other ways through the huge amount of investment that is provided through the Assembly's capital programme, which is larger this year than it has ever been.

I agree with Mr McQuillan about the importance of retaining essential services. When restraints are imposed on the public sector, we must try to protect front line services, but that will not always be possible. That is why I say time and time again — Mr Farry has pressed me on the issue on a number of occasions — that we must prioritise the actions that we can take rather than simply attempting to protect everything. That cannot be done.

In conclusion, I trust that Members will show the necessary support for the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010. I believe that it is an important statutory rule and one that will be widely welcomed by households and businesses, including those in North Down. For the third year, all ratepayers will see the benefit that devolution provides. We are providing

real and tangible support to communities, households and businesses. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

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

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 69; Noes 6.

AYES

Nationalist:

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Leonard , Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey.

Unionist:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Irwin, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells , Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr Weir.

NOES

Other:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Farry and Mr McCarthy.

Total votes	75	Total Ayes	69	(92%)
Nationalist Votes	32	Nationalist Ayes	32	(100%)
Unionist Votes	37	Unionist Ayes	37	(100%)
Other Votes	6	Other Ayes	0	(0%)

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 be affirmed.

Executive Committee Business

Equality Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel
(Mr S Wilson):** I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Equality Bill dealing with the abolition of the presumption of advancement.

That should clear the Benches fairly quickly.

The aim of securing this legislative consent motion is to enable what remains of the doctrine of presumption of advancement in the law of trusts in Northern Ireland to be abolished. Abolition of the residual elements of that doctrine will ensure that Northern Ireland law is compliant with article 5 of protocol 7 to the European Convention on Human Rights. That, in turn, paves the way for the UK Government finally to ratify protocol 7 to the convention and to join a majority of member states of the Council of Europe in eliminating inequality in the law between spouses.

I will not keep Members too long with a lengthy explanation of the relevant legal principles and the historical development of the doctrines of presumption of resulting trust and presumption of advancement. Some explanation, however, is inevitable, for the benefit of Members who do not sit on the Committee for Finance and Personnel — perhaps even for some of those Members too — for whom this may be the first and, hopefully, the last time that they need to turn their minds to the operation of the presumption of advancement.

I will start by outlining the convention rights in article 5 of protocol 7 to the European Convention on Human Rights:

“Spouses shall enjoy equality of rights and responsibilities of a private law character between them, and in their relations with their children, as to marriage, during marriage and in the event of its dissolution. This Article shall not prevent States from taking such measures as are necessary in the interests of the children.”

The present UK Government first announced their intention to ratify protocol 7 as far back as 1997. Various efforts have been made since then to secure the passage of amendments to the law by way of a private Member's Bill in the

House of Commons but without success. To ratify protocol 7, the UK Government need to remove the remaining aspects of UK law that offend against the rule on equality of spouses in the rights and responsibilities between themselves and in their relations with their children.

How does presumption of advancement offend against article 5 of protocol 7? The presumption of advancement is one of the means by which a court allocates ownership of property based on a presumption of the intention of the donor of the property. In that context, “property” means money or valuables as well as bricks and mortar and, for example, farmland.

The starting point for ascertaining ownership by intention is the presumption of resulting trust. If a person transfers money or property to another without receiving anything in return, the law presumes that the donor intends to retain the beneficial interest in the value of money or in the property. In certain circumstances — for example, where a special relationship exists between a donor and the recipient of the gift — the presumption of advancement displaces the presumption of resulting trust. One of the few remaining examples of that under the law of Northern Ireland is that money or property given by a father to his child is presumed to be a gift to the child, subject to any contrary intention at the time the gift was made. The father loses any beneficial interest in the money or property that he had prior to making the gift. By contrast, no such presumption of advancement arises in relation to gifts made by a mother to her children. In that case, the primary rule of presumption of resulting trust applies. Money or property that is gifted by a mother to her child is presumed to be held by the child on resulting trust for the benefit of the mother. The child may acquire a legal interest — for example, legal title to the property in the gift — but the beneficial interest in the money or property remains with the mother. The rule is subject to any contrary intention arising at the time the gift was made by the mother to her children.

Although the rules on how the presumption of advancement works rarely arise in practice today, they clearly represent a difference in treatment of gifts by parents to their children, depending on whether the gift was made by the father or by the mother of the children. The rules on the operation of the presumption of advancement and other rules still in force in

England and Wales have long been regarded as offending against the equality of spouses provision in article 5 of protocol 7 to the European Convention on Human Rights. That has prevented the UK from ratifying protocol 7, making it one of the few members of the Council of Europe to fail to do so.

2.15 pm

The presumption of advancement in Northern Ireland has already been abolished in respect of transfers of property between spouses and between engaged couples. Article 16 of the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 abolished the rule in relation to gifts between spouses. Previously, the presumption of advancement applied to gifts of money or property made by a husband to his wife but not to the gift of money or property from a wife to her husband. Article 16 also abolished the rule as it applied to gifts of money or property between engaged couples. Previously, a gift from a man to his fiancée was subject to the presumption of advancement, whereas a gift from a woman to her fiancé was subject to the presumption of resulting trust.

It was thought at the time that the provision was sufficient to ensure that the Northern Ireland law complied with protocol 7 to the European Convention on Human Rights. The operation of the presumption of advancement with regard to transfers of property to children was overlooked since it was not widely appreciated that the presumption applied to gifts made by a father to his children but not those made by a mother to her children. For the sake of completeness, I should also note that the 2005 Order removed several other anomalies that prevented the law of Northern Ireland being fully compliant with article 5 of protocol 7.

I have kept the explanation of the issue as brief and comprehensible as possible. I turn now to the motion under consideration. The reason why we are here and why some in the Chamber may still be awake — I am amazed that so many people have remained in the Chamber — is that the UK Government wrote to me last November seeking my agreement to the GB Equality Bill's containing a provision that would abolish the residual elements of the doctrine of presumption of advancement in Northern Ireland. Since trust law and property law are devolved matters, the Westminster Parliament

will not usually legislate in the transferred field without the consent of the Assembly.

I wrote to the Solicitor General agreeing to the proposal in principle, emphasising that I would have to seek the views of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and ministerial colleagues on the Northern Ireland Executive Committee. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the issue on 13 January 2010, and the Committee's report endorsing the proposal that the Equality Bill be used to remove what remains of the presumption of advancement in Northern Ireland has now been published. The Executive Committee have also considered the matter and agreed to my seeking the necessary consent from the Assembly in the form of today's debate.

It has been decided to use the Equality Bill as the legislative vehicle through which to abolish the presumption of advancement in England and Wales and to remove several other anomalies, and so enable the UK to ratify protocol 7 to the convention. The GB Equality Bill was passed by the House of Commons on 2 December 2009, and introduced into the House of Lords. The Second Reading in the House of Lords took place on the 15 December 2009, with the remaining stages to be completed early in 2010.

As Members will be aware, the GB Equality Bill aims to harmonise and in some cases extend existing discrimination law covering the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnerships, pregnancy, maternity, race, religion, belief, sex, and sexual orientation. It will also harmonise provisions defining indirect discrimination. The Bill does not generally apply to Northern Ireland, it having been decided that this place is best placed to decide the future direction of equality law in Northern Ireland.

The amendment to the GB Equality Bill abolishing the presumption of advancement was agreed in the House of Lords on 9 February. The amendment tabled by Lord Lester of Herne Hill, a Liberal Democrat, was accepted by the UK Government and is set out at the end of the memorandum I have provided to accompany the tabling of the motion.

This is a small, technical matter, and I am content that allowing the Westminster Parliament to legislate on our behalf on this one issue does not unduly compromise or prejudice the Assembly's right to pass laws for Northern

Ireland on devolved matters. I look forward to an interesting and stimulating debate on the issue.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel was notified by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 17 December 2009 of a proposed British Government amendment to the Westminster Equality Bill that would abolish the presumption of advancement in family and property law in England and Wales. As equality and anti-discrimination legislation are transferred matters, the provisions of the Westminster Equality Bill, as introduced, do not extend to here. However, it is proposed that the provisions of the amendment, which was tabled on 12 January 2010, should be extended to the North of Ireland.

On 13 January 2010, the Committee was briefed by departmental officials and the Assembly's Research Services on the implications of the amendment relating to the presumption of advancement. Members noted that the amendment would remove a problem of consistency in the law and allow the British Government to ratify Protocol 7, crime and family, to the European Convention on Human Rights. DFP officials also confirmed that the principle of presumption of advancement that related to spouses and engaged couples was abolished in 2005 and that there did not appear to be a specific reason why it was not abolished completely at that time.

Having considered the evidence, the Committee agreed that it supported the Department of Finance and Personnel in seeking Assembly endorsement of the principle of the extension to the North of Ireland of the proposed amendment to the Westminster Equality Bill to abolish what remains of the doctrine of presumption of advancement. Last week, the Committee also circulated a report on its considerations of the legislative consent motion to all MLAs. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House.

Sinn Féin regards this legislative consent motion as an exceptional case. Normally, the devolved Assembly, rather than Westminster, will legislate for our community. As far as equality and anti-discrimination legislation is concerned, I reiterate my party's support for the introduction of a robust and enforceable bill of rights that has equality at its core and that provides rights-based protection for all the people of the North

of Ireland. It is worth remembering that that bill of rights is one of the commitments contained in the Good Friday Agreement. No one should be frightened of equality for all.

Mr Weir: I support the legislative consent motion. On the streets of North Down, which the Minister mentioned earlier, when the conversation moves away from the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 and the desire to pay more money, people talk about very little other than the presumption of advancement and this legislative consent motion. The Member who spoke before me wants equality to be at the core, which is worthy. I look forward to her party's support for our motion on the abolition of 50:50 recruitment to the police, which we will debate later today.

The legislative consent motion concerns trust law. When I was a law student at Queen's University, there was an old joke — I use that term very loosely — that we would be subjected to a debate on recent developments in trust law. Given the silence around the Chamber, I suspect that that was lost on most Members. Most trust law dates from the nineteenth century, although the joke perhaps indicates the lack of wit in the law faculty 20-odd years ago. Nevertheless, the legislative consent motion clears away an archaic relic.

The differential in presumptions between spouses has already been removed from legislation, thus bringing our law into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. It seems a complete nonsense to suggest that, in trust law, there should be a different presumption of advancement between a father and a child and between a mother and a child. It makes absolutely no sense to differentiate between the two. We all have some reservations about the use of legislative consent motions. However, we should embrace the proposal to make a relatively technical change that is based on fairness and equality. The format that is being used will bring that proposal into legislation at the earliest possible opportunity.

For those in the Chamber who are genuinely committed to equality, the motion is worthy of support, and I am delighted to support it.

Mr McNarry: Ulster Unionists believe in equality, because, as a party of civil and religious liberty, we see important protections in it for the citizen. The fact that the gap between rich and poor is at its widest since the Second World

War highlights the fact that to tackle inequality we must also tackle its causes. For example, we deplore the fact that the Government have failed to meet almost half their equality targets, including one of particular importance, which is to encourage more women to start up in business and to increase the proportion of women in senior ranks in the Civil Service.

Although the Ulster Unionist Party supports aspects of the UK Equality Bill, such as attempts to reduce the gender pay gap and any form of discrimination, lessons must be learned from any proposed equality Bill for Northern Ireland. At present, the dysfunctional Executive are failing on many fronts. We must give families and communities adequate support to tackle educational underachievement, especially among young Protestant males in inner-city areas and in big housing estates in the towns surrounding Belfast, and to tackle the impacts of intergenerational unemployment. Therefore, we must resist attempts to damage an educational system that has been known the world over for enabling social mobility.

Northern Ireland is now a more diverse and tolerant place. However, we still have serious problems associated —

Mr Bell: On a point of order, is the object of the debate not to speak on the subject?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was going to draw the Member's attention to returning to the motion.

Mr McNarry: It is a very wide-ranging subject, on which I am sure the Speaker will give a ruling. However, I was getting to that, and I am sorry that I tried the novice's patience. I just wanted to say —

Mr Bell: You are past your sell-by date.

Mr McNarry: You just be careful, now, my fellow Member from Strangford. When you want to be frivolous and when you do not is a matter for yourself —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to come to the subject of the motion. I also ask for all remarks to be made through the Chair.

Mr McNarry: I will not repeat them; I will leave that to Hansard.

The point to which I was getting is that we have problems associated with sectarianism, racism and inequality. Therefore, legislation of any

nature must be robust enough to tackle that discrimination.

This legislation, of course, is a narrow and specific application of just one element of equality legislation. It refers, effectively, to the presumption of advancement between parent and child, explicitly between father and child, because the presumption of advancement between married and engaged couples has already been abolished.

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

This is also enabling legislation because, once the presumption of advancement is abolished, it leaves the way open for other things to happen. There are two provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights that have yet to be fully implemented into United Kingdom domestic law. For that to happen, the presumption of advancement will need to be abolished or, at the very least, have its effects equalised between men and women. Those provisions are protocol 7, article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which refers to equality between spouses, and protocol 12, article 1, which refers to the general prohibition of discrimination. With regard to protocol 7, article 5, the United Kingdom Government want to repeal the parts of United Kingdom law that affect the equality of spouses in rights and responsibilities between themselves and in the context of their relations with their children.

Without a shadow of a doubt, therefore, we in the Ulster Unionist Party have no difficulty with this legislative consent motion being passed today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, we need to take our ease for only a few seconds. The next speaker after Question Time will be Declan O'Loan.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Department of Education: Newbuilds

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education how much funding her Department has allocated for new capital builds in the coming year. (AQO 791/10)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. Níor socraíodh pleananna caiteachais caipitil don bhliain airgeadais 2010-11 go fóill. Ach sa tréimhse bhuiséid go dtí seo, tá £427 milliún san iomlán á infheistiú san eastát scoileanna.

Capital spending plans for 2010-11 have not yet been finalised. However, in the budget period to date, a total of £427 million has been invested in the schools estate. There are 16 schools capital projects currently on site, representing an investment of over £252 million, and 24 school projects have been completed in the period, representing an investment of £176 million. That includes £19 million for Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School in Newry; £23.4 million for Ashfield Girls' High School in Belfast; £23.8 million for Bangor Academy; £13.1 million for Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh; £31 million for Holy Cross College in Strabane; £2 million for Victoria Primary School in Ballyhalbert; £3.5 million for Towerview Primary School in Bangor; and £13.5 million for De La Salle College in west Belfast. Those are just some examples.

It is important that our investment be viable and sustainable in the long term and adheres to our statutory duties in relation to equality and targeting on the basis of objective need. To that end, I commissioned a review of current capital works to ensure that they are consistent with the overall policy framework. The review will ensure that the available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for every taxpayer.

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

I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. There is a cutback of £92 million in capital expenditure. It would be useful if the Minister could inform schools whether their projects will go ahead. Will she reveal how much of the expenditure that was outlined will be spent on PPPs and other related charges, and how much will go on newbuilds?

The Minister of Education: I question respectfully the amount of money about which the Member is talking in relation to the cutbacks in the capital budget. The figure that I have is £22 million, not £92 million. I hope that I do not have to find £92 million, or we are in serious difficulties.

Cuimsíonn an buiséad caipitil roinnt réimsí chomh maith le mór-oibreacha nua, lena n-áirítear tionscadail don óige, iompar scoile, luath-bhlianta agus mionoibreacha.

The capital budget covers a range of areas in addition to major new works, including youth projects, schools transport, early years and minor works. It is important that our investment in the schools estate be viable and sustainable in the long term and adheres to our statutory duties in relation to equality and targeting on the basis of objective need. We are faced with an extremely challenging financial environment, and I will continue to press for additional capital funds for the school estate. As I said, we are currently finalising budget proposals. Once we have done that, I will write to the Member in relation to the question that he asked.

Mr Storey: I know that the Minister and the Department have a difficulty with numeracy, given that we have waited for two-and-a-half years for the report to come out. Can the Minister not even read her own documents? They clearly show that she started with a gross budget of £212 million, which was reduced to £191 million. A further £22 million was taken off that, and £170 million has already been committed, despite press releases from her Department that try to tell us that somehow new works will be done.

Will the Minister at last tell this House honestly that no new works will be carried out? Will she reveal the criteria of the capital review that she is carrying out, so that we can see exactly what she is up to? Nobody on this side of the House trusts the Minister to even look after money, let alone the Department of Education.

The Minister of Education: In light of the Member's derogatory comments about my numeracy skills, he will be delighted to know that we have a North/South numeracy conference in Enniskillen on Thursday, at which one of my colleagues from the South will join me. The Member will also be delighted to know that because of transfer 2010, we will now really focus on numeracy rather than the distortion of the curriculum that occurred in the past.

I do not accept the Member's comments.

Mr Storey: What's new?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members not to shout across the Chamber, and visual aids should not be used unless they are relevant.

Mr B McCrea: I shall not comment on the Minister's abilities or otherwise. However, I am interested in the £170 million of apparently free cash. How much of that money will be taken up in existing PPP or other public finance initiatives, and how much will be left for newbuilds, about which schools want to hear?

The Minister of Education: We are finalising proposals, which I will bring to the Member and to the House at the appropriate time.

Ms Lo: Is Lagan College in south Belfast one of the schools that will be financed in the coming year? It has been waiting for the past eight years, so if its building programme is not due to commence in the coming year, will the Minister update Members on its progress?

The Minister of Education: I will not comment on individual projects. As I said, we are finalising proposals, which I will bring before the House at the appropriate time.

Schools: Vandalism

2. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Education what assessment she has made of the cost of vandalism to school property, and what action she is taking to deter this type of activity. (AQO 792/10)

The Minister of Education: I have witnessed at first hand the damage caused, particularly in recent times, to a number of our schools, not least last summer, when schools such as Whitehouse Primary School, Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche in Castlewellan, St Mary's Star of the Sea Primary School, St Patrick's College Bearnaagheeha and Corpus Christi College were

the targets of attacks. Those attacks impacted not only financially but on the very heart of the schools. The impact is far-reaching and affects many people, including teachers, pupils and the entire community, creating suspicion and fear. The cost of addressing the attacks was £2.4 million, which could have been used to improve many schools and to make life easier for teachers and pupils alike. Since 2004, the total cost of vandalism in the schools estate is approximately £3.6 million.

Tá roinnt tionscnamh á gcur i bhfeidhm ag gach bord agus ag an Roinn chun déileáil le fadhb na loitiméireachta i scoileanna; cuimsíonn siad suiteáil TCI agus soilsiú feabhsaithe, córas rialaithe rochtana agus aláraim ionraidh.

A number of initiatives are being developed by all boards and by the Department to address the problem of vandalism in schools, including the installation of improved CCTV, lighting, access control systems and intruder alarms. In addition, physical infrastructure works are being carried out to gates and fencing. Nevertheless, we all agree that it is important to get the balance right, and, despite the measures that we take to keep our children safe, we cannot lose sight of the fact that schools are, and always will be, focal points of communities. Schools should encourage the community to use their facilities. Schools can help to define and shape the communities to which their children belong, and they should seek to promote appropriate access. We cannot allow schools to be turned into fortresses with high fences and forbidding exteriors. Children's lifelong perception of their schooldays can be affected by their surroundings.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister needs to realise that the problem is much wider than the schools that she mentioned. I am disappointed that she did not mention, for example, the spate of vandalism in the Ballyclare area, in my South Antrim constituency, not only in primary but also in secondary schools. Surely it is a disgraceful situation when money that is needed for delivering front line services has to be spent on fencing, etc. Surely the Department should take more responsibility for dealing with vandalism and allow schools to get on with education.

The Minister of Education: I absolutely agree with the Member. Vandalism in schools is disgraceful, and the Department will do everything that it can to ensure that it does not

happen. However, it is a wider societal problem, and I say to the Member, respectfully, that as politicians and elected representatives, it is our duty to ensure that we all play our part. My Department will not be found wanting.

I would be grateful if the Member could provide the Department with details of the vandalism in Ballyclare. I agree with the Member that it should not be happening.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister's officials gave figures to the Education Committee, which indicate that there is £270 million worth of backlog in school maintenance and a £92 million shortfall in the capital budget. Will the Minister explain how a crumbling schools estate will facilitate an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century?

The Minister of Education: First, I ask the Member to support me when I put in funding proposals, because I agree that we have a backlog in maintenance, and I would like to see more Members round the Chamber supporting my Department's bids for more resources. Therefore, I look forward to support from all the parties when I bring forward proposals for various resources.

In this financial year, the boards have allocated £26.5 million to maintenance works. That includes an additional £5 million that I set aside in September 2009, in recognition of the importance of addressing the levels of underinvestment in the schools estate.

Sa bhliain airgeadais 2009-2010, leathdháil na boird £26.5 milliún ar oibreacha cothabhála.

The budget for 2010-11 is under consideration. No decisions have been made at this point, but I look forward to proposals coming from the Education Committee, of which Mr Bradley is a member.

Mr Kinahan: Out of the Minister's maintenance backlog, which we are told is £240 million, less than £30 million is being spent. What effect does vandalism have on that?

The Minister of Education: Vandalism has an enormous effect. It has a monetary effect, and it has an effect on the children, the teachers and the school workforce. As I said earlier in a previous answer, it is important that we as a society come together and ensure that we do everything to stop vandalism, and the best

way that we can do that is by leading. The Hillsborough agreement and what came out of it is important. The working groups are important, because we are sending a message that vandalism is not accepted, but also, importantly, the best way of dealing with vandalism in the medium to longer term is to ensure that nobody is left out of society. When you have 11,000 young people leaving school without five GCSEs, including English and maths, or Irish and maths, you have people who do not have a stake in society. Therefore, the policies that we are bringing forward, including Every School a Good School, transfer 2010, our Irish-medium review and the entitlement framework are important.

We are looking at the statistics of young people who are staying on, or want to stay on, at school post-16 years of age. There is a huge increase in the numbers of young people who are staying on at school, and I welcome that. That is because many schools getting very good results, whereas, in the past, we lost a lot of those 16-year-olds. Therefore, that is an issue that I am looking at in my Department. The Member will know that the Minister in his party is looking at the whole area of NEETS, that is, young people who are not in employment, education or training.

STEM Subjects

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to encourage the uptake of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects in schools following the recent success of Northern Ireland schools in the BT Young Scientist Awards. (AQO 793/10)

The Minister of Education: Tá bearta suntasacha á nglacadh ag mo Roinn ar roinnt réimsí lena chinntiú go measann daoine óga go bhfuil ábhar STEM corraitheach, spreagthach agus fiúntach.

My Department has been taking significant action on a number of fronts to ensure that our young people see STEM subjects as exciting, stimulating and fulfilling. The revised curriculum provides much greater freedom for teachers to explore STEM-related learning with pupils. The entitlement framework will guarantee all post-primary pupils aged 14 and above greater choice and flexibility.

Through the Innovation Fund Ireland, for 2008-09 to 2010-11, funding of £10.7 million has been allocated for science, technology,

engineering and mathematics, and we are undertaking a wide range of other interventions to promote STEM subjects. Some 17 post-primary schools have been designated as STEM specialist schools.

2.45 pm

The recently published Department of Education/Department for Employment and Learning joint career strategy provides young people with the opportunity to research STEM-related careers. We have commissioned a programme of professional development for teachers, as well as improving the range and quality of resources that are available to teachers and pupils. We are supporting the Institute of Physics in Ireland's establishment of a physics-teacher network here. We fund the successful STEM truck, which is a £1.2 million mobile teaching laboratory and workshop. It is a resource for the entire island, which benefits a wide range of schools.

My Department also funds a range of exciting STEM events, such as the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition, to which Mr Brady's question referred. As a result of working closely with BT, entries from the North were up by 66% this year. I was delighted to be at the awards ceremony in Dublin, where two projects from schools here won major awards and 17 other projects were awarded prizes. I am delighted that schools in the Member's constituency — Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School and St Mary's High School in Newry — were award winners. They won the best overall group award, the North's special award and a travel award.

My Department also funds the STEM Experience, which is delivered by Sentinus. It is an annual event that involves over 3,500 pupils who are between the ages of 10 and 13. At the beginning of February, I was delighted to formally launch Engineers' Week 2010 at Victoria College, Belfast, with the Institution of Civil Engineers. I also attended the West Belfast Business Education Partnership's STEM careers convention.

Therefore, the Department is doing good work on STEM subjects. However, it cannot rest on its laurels. It must continue that work.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. I take the opportunity to congratulate my old school, Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School, on its success in the competition. Can the Minister give the House an idea of how

much funding her Department has secured for STEM subjects?

The Minister of Education: Chomh maith leis an gcistiú suntasach a thugtar do scoileanna agus an ciste a thacaíonn le cur i bhfeidhm gach gné den churaclam athbhreithnithe, lena n-áirítear eolaíocht, teicneolaíocht agus matamaitic, tá ciste de £10.7 milliún faighte ag mo Roinn ón gciste nuálaíochta den tréimhse 2008-09 go dtí 2010-11.

As well as significant funding that has been provided to schools to support implementation of all aspects of the revised curriculum, which includes science, technology and maths, my Department secured £10.7 million through the innovation fund — £3 million capital and £7.7 million resource — for the period from 2008-09 to 2010-11. It uses that funding to enhance STEM subjects through the development of specialist STEM schools at post-primary level; development of careers education, information, advice and guidance for STEM areas; development of curriculum resources to support growth of STEM take-up in schools; and the promotion of science, technology, engineering and maths work in primary and post-primary schools. It is important that there is a focus on primary schools because that is where the spark — the chispa — that ignites the fire of learning is lit.

I thank the Member for his supplementary question.

Mr Bell: I welcome the moves that are being made to advance STEM subjects. However, does the Minister agree that there is nervousness in the economy that progress is not being made quickly enough to ensure that young people who come through the system have adequate qualifications? Progress that has been made to date is, at best, modest. If the Assembly is to stimulate Northern Ireland's economy, it needs to go further faster.

The Minister of Education: I agree absolutely with the Member. I have talked to different interests in the business sector about skills, education and the economy. The business sector tells me that there is a lack of the necessary level of literacy and numeracy skills. It is worried about opportunities for young people post-16 years of age and the number who are currently being failed by the education system. It is worried about the 11,000 young

people who come through the system without necessary skills.

The Department is looking at how to deal with that. As the Member will know, the issue relates not only to STEM subjects but to literacy and numeracy. The Every School a Good School strategy focuses on that issue. The number of young people who are currently being failed by the system cannot continue.

The issue can also be linked to the previous question on vandalism. If underachievement in the system is not dealt with, the economy will suffer. We cannot afford to let that happen. I agree absolutely with the Member. His question and comments are well made.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's detailed response. Will the Minister outline what steps her Department has taken to instigate the proposals and actions coming out of the STEM review report? Will she assure the House that all the departmental money set aside for STEM has been used and that none of it has been surrendered?

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, a small amount of money that was ring-fenced for capital projects was surrendered. We spent £1.2 million in relation to the STEM truck, but I made sure to surrender money in time for it to be used by other Departments.

As I said in response to an earlier question, we have spent an enormous amount of money across a wide range of STEM-related initiatives. That needs to continue.

Schools: Overcrowding

4. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Education to outline her strategy to reduce overcrowding in classrooms. (AQO 794/10)

The Minister of Education: Glacaim leis go bhfuil an Comhalta ag fiafraí díom ar mhaith liom go laghdófaí méideanna ranga. Is é an freagra ar an gceist ná gur mhaith.

I assume that the Member is asking whether I wish to see class sizes reduced. The answer to that question is, of course, yes. It is important to reduce class sizes, because the quality of learning is vital to later educational progress. Although school leadership and the quality of teaching are key influences on learning outcomes, there is evidence that smaller class

sizes and, thus, lower pupil:teacher ratios in the early years can have a positive effect on outcomes.

The pupil:teacher ratio also has a key role to play for teachers in schools that have significant proportions of disadvantaged pupils. Smaller classes enable them to deal with barriers to learning, to give individual help to pupils or to work in small groups. In all primary and post-primary schools, the responsibility for determining the actual pupil:teacher ratio and class size rests with the schools through the use of their delegated budgets. That includes determining the number of teachers and non-teaching members of staff, including classroom assistants, that they can afford.

Due to the importance of early years development, funding to support the foundation stage of the revised curriculum has been fully delegated to primary schools since 2008. That funding amounts to over £22 million in the current year, and it ensures the provision of classroom assistants for all year 1 and year 2 classes in all primary schools.

I welcome the interest that the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) have shown in this area. It will be important to reduce class sizes further. However, that will require substantial investment, which will need approval across the Executive.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Minister for her answer. I asked the question with primary schools in mind. Does the Minister accept that the facts sit uncomfortably against the actions of the Department and the strategy that she has just enunciated? Pupil:teacher ratios are low in some schools in rural parts of my constituency of North Antrim, yet those schools are under greatest threat of being closed. Surely, trying to keep those schools open should be a dynamic drive in the community, because they allow for lower class sizes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should ask a question.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister accept that prep schools in Northern Ireland are disproportionately affected by the policy? They also have a low pupil:teacher ratio, yet they are under threat of closure.

The Minister of Education: The Member asked a couple of questions. As I said in my earlier answer to Mr Paisley Jnr, class size is one factor in relation to good quality education in a school. If a school gets below a certain threshold, and it has a small number of teachers with composite classes, it can be difficult for the teachers, pupils and classroom assistants. Therefore, different factors contribute to leadership and to outcomes for children and young people. I do not accept that it is good to keep a school open in all cases. We have a sustainable schools policy. The issue has to be looked at in the round, because, ultimately, as Mr Paisley Jnr and other Members know well, parents will make decisions. If a school is becoming so small that it has a number of composite classes, parents may choose to bypass it. That has happened in a number of cases.

The Member will be aware that George Bain raised the issue of prep schools. The issue is one of inequality, and it is not fair that some schools are treated more equally than others. Therefore, I am reviewing that matter, and an equality impact assessment is out. Those are issues that we are looking at. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members not to shout across the Chamber. If certain Members persist in doing so, I will name them.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I ask the Minister, in that context, for some more detail — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot hear Mr Leonard.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, for calling for that quiet.

I ask the Minister, in that context, to give some more detail on how schools are funded.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Tugann na socruithe um bainistiú áitiúil scoileanna solúbthacht do bhoird gobharnóirí scoileanna cinntí a dhéanamh ar mhéideanna ranga.

The local management of schools arrangements allow schools' boards of governors the flexibility to take decisions on class sizes as part of their responsibilities for determining their schools' staffing complement and for managing budgets. All primary schools with pupils in years one or two receive funding within the delegated local management of schools budgets under the

foundation stage factor of the common funding formula. That factor is intended to provide primary schools with additional funds to ensure that they deliver the foundation stage of the primary curriculum effectively, including the use of classroom assistants and classroom resources.

The amount of foundation stage funding that is allocated to each primary school is based on the number of eligible pupils who are in the school. Total funding of over £22 million was distributed across all grant-aided primary schools in the 2009-2010 financial year. Priority has been given to increasing funding to front line school services and to increasing the proportion of available funding going to primary schools. That has resulted in a significant uplift — from 65.8% to 70.4% — in the proportion of funding that is delegated to primary schools for each pupil compared with post-primary schools.

I want to make a comment about secondary schools, because at the moment they are suffering the brunt of demographic decline and the inequality of the system. In any changes that we make, we have to be clear that we do not disadvantage our secondary schools. Secondary schools are already very disadvantaged, with a disproportionate number of children on free school meals and of children with special educational needs, and that situation is a result of the inequality of our current system.

Mrs M Bradley: Considering the contribution that factors such as smaller classes made to raising standards, what resources have been allocated to reducing class sizes?

The Minister of Education: I answered that question on two occasions in previous questions for oral answer. I absolutely share with all Members the belief that smaller class sizes is one of the key factors in raising standards. Note that I said that it is one of the key factors; leadership is another, and we are pouring money into professional qualifications for head teachers. Last week, I was at the ceremony in the Ramada hotel at which 212 of our teachers were, after two years' hard work, granted the professional qualification for head teachers. School leadership is one of the essential criteria. Class size is not the single factor that determines outcomes, and, as I said, schools can become so small that it creates difficulties, particularly with composite classes and small numbers of teachers, and it can also affect the morale of schools.

Conductive Education

5. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has spent on conductive education in each of the last three years. (AQO 795/10)

The Minister of Education: Chuir príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mbord oideachais agus leabharlainne in iúl dom gur cuireadh páiste amháin i scoil Buddy Bear sna blianta acadúla 2006-08, 2008-09, agus 2009-2010.

The chief executives of the education and library boards have advised me that one child has been placed in the Buddy Bear school in the academic years 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-2010. That child is financially supported through the payment of school fees to attend that school by the Western Education and Library Board. The costs are as follows: in 2007-08 it was £22,680; in 2008-09 it was £23,355; and in 2009-2010 it was £15,880.

Education and library boards have a statutory duty to educate children with special educational needs in ordinary schools, and that right to be educated in an ordinary mainstream school was strengthened with the instruction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005.

That provision seeks to enable more children with special educational needs to be included successfully in mainstream education. I confirm that no grant-aided schools provide conductive education. The Buddy Bear School, which specialises in conductive education, is an independent school approved by the Department under article 26 of the Education Order 1996 as suitable for the admission of children with special educational needs. Education and library boards do not, therefore, have to seek the prior approval of the Department before placing a child in the school.

3.00 pm

Employment and Learning

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Proposed Changes

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the proposed changes to the programme-led apprenticeship scheme. (AQO 805/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): At the outset, I stress that the preferred model for apprentices is one in which they are employees and follow a three- to four-year apprenticeship framework agreed by employers through the relevant sector skills council. Unfortunately, in these difficult economic times, employers have not been recruiting apprentices. Therefore, the programme-led apprenticeship scheme was introduced during the downturn to ensure that young people have the skills to avail themselves of jobs when there is an upturn in the labour market.

The programme is not a lesser or second-tier provision. Participants follow the same apprenticeship frameworks as they would have followed had they been employed. The programme was designed to allow a one-day-a-week placement to enable participants to gain the NVQ element of the apprenticeship framework, which must be assessed on an employer's premises. Unfortunately, a one-day-a-week work placement is proving unattractive to employers. Therefore, I am considering allowing a young person to have a work placement for up to three days each week. Nothing else in the programme will change.

However, I stress that if employers still do not provide work placements in these difficult times, the only part of the apprenticeship framework that young people will not get, compared to an employed apprenticeship, is the NVQ. They will still achieve the technical certificate, which is an important qualification valued by employers, they will gain relevant essential-skills qualifications and they will develop the occupational skills and underpinning knowledge for the NVQ. The only difference is that they will not have been assessed in the workplace for the NVQ, and that can be picked up later.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. When the programme-led apprenticeship scheme was first introduced, many employers were unhappy that they had not been properly consulted. They now say that had the Minister talked to them and listened to them at that time, they would have told him that the scheme would not work, as a one-day-a-week placement is not enough evidence for the NVQ programme. Will the Minister now consult properly with employers?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Consultation with employers is an ongoing part of this scheme and other schemes. Mixed messages are coming from employers. Today, I received a letter from an employer who was complaining about the three-day-a-week placement. It is a no-win situation. The number of placements has reduced significantly. We have had a strong response from young people to the scheme, with almost 3,000 people having taken it up. About half of them are in placements. Clearly, that is not satisfactory, and it is fewer than we want. However, in the current atmosphere, employers must take their own decisions, and we understand that. I assure the Member that we will remain in close touch with employers, although they do not have a single fixed view.

Mr Shannon: Over the past few days, the construction industry announced that around 20,000 people have been laid off in the past year. That indicates to me that the opportunity for apprenticeships is even less than it was. What help can the Minister give to those people seeking apprenticeships, in light of the difficulty with job opportunities in the construction industry?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is correct. I regularly travel around the Department's network of 35 jobs and benefits offices. I have visited most of them, some more than once, and the overwhelming message from those offices is that there are virtually no available jobs in the construction sector. Many companies are finalising work that they already had in hand, and the Department has had great difficulty in getting employers to take on apprentices. That was the rationale for introducing the programme-led scheme last autumn, and all Members will agree that an employer-led programme is the most advantageous.

In addition, many young people who would normally have followed an apprenticeship in the construction sector are now reconfiguring

their situation and seeking apprenticeships in other sectors. That is putting even more pressure on those sectors. The construction sector has, obviously, been hit hard, but it is a significant part of our economy that will require a properly trained workforce in the future. However, the number of apprentices who can avail themselves of the opportunity of getting an employer to take them on has drastically reduced, and, through the programme-led scheme, the Department is trying to find an alternative means to occupy those young people and to give them the best opportunities.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister said, the programme-led scheme is a short-term solution. However, does he recognise the fact that there is a history of unworked work placements weakening and undermining the industry? People need only read the PAC report on job placement schemes to see that there has been a historic exploitation and abuse of apprentices.

Furthermore, is the Minister considering an assessment of the long-term consequences of the programme-led apprenticeship scheme? He has said that he received mixed messages from employers, but there is an issue about the long-term effects of not having good apprentices entering the workforce.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

As I said to Mr Shannon, no one doubts that employer-led schemes are the better of the two models. I do not dispute that for one minute.

I am also conscious that a PAC report that examined apprenticeship schemes before 2006 clearly indicated exploitation under those schemes. The Department is monitoring those issues, which has benefited from the PAC report. The current schemes were designed to make it harder for employers to exploit their apprentices. However, I accept that there will always be those who will try to do so. The Department will maintain the highest possible standards, and I do not want people to think that the scheme is second-rate. It is not, and it will be carried out to the highest possible standards.

When the programme-led scheme was introduced, I gave the House an undertaking that I would review it at an early stage, and I intend to do that. I also told the House that it was a response to the recession, and the Department would monitor its response

continually. Should the Department decide that any changes are necessary, I will have no hesitation in coming back to the House.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Work Placements

2. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students on the programme-led apprenticeships scheme have experienced difficulty in getting work placements, and as a result have failed to meet the relevant workplace-based requirements; and to outline what his Department is doing to address this issue. (AQO 806/10)

10. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students on the programme-led apprenticeships scheme have experienced problems securing a work placement. (AQO 814/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 10 together.

On the basis of available information from training providers, there are approximately 1,500 participants without an employer placement. There are two reasons for that: employers find it difficult to plan anything meaningful for students for only one day; and it costs as much to insure a student for one day as it does for longer periods. Therefore, as outlined in my answer to the previous question, I am considering allowing a young person to have a work placement for up to three days each week.

Participants are not scheduled to complete the NVQ element of the apprenticeship framework until the end of their second year. Therefore, if we can act quickly to help providers to secure work placements, it will be possible for participants to gather the necessary evidence for their NVQ work-placement assessment. The Department is due to meet the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils on 26 February to discuss the issue further. I propose to introduce agreed changes to the current arrangements as quickly as possible.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware that a number of Members raised concerns when programme-led apprenticeships were introduced. We appreciate that the construction industry has taken a hit, but what incentives is his Department offering

employers to take on young folk to do their apprenticeship training and perhaps to revert to employer-led apprenticeships?

Mr Deputy Speaker: A question, please.

Mr Buchanan: Employer-led apprenticeships are by far the best way forward.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I agree with the Member's last point. He is talking to the converted when he says that the employer-led scheme is by far the best mechanism. However, I repeat that the reason that we have a programme-led scheme is that there was insufficient uptake of apprentices by employers. In other words, places were cut. Even some of our biggest companies, which would normally have taken on significant numbers of apprentices each year, slashed their numbers, and in some cases decided to take on no apprentices at all. In those circumstances, what were we to do? Were we to allow apprentices to fall by the wayside? I have no doubt that had we taken no action in the autumn, thousands of young people would now be on jobseeker's allowance. The scheme's take-up rate — 3,000 places at present — is very strong, and it was very strong right from the beginning, so it is perfectly clear that young people saw an advantage in the scheme.

The overriding incentive for employers is to have a highly trained workforce, which is the best way for them to maintain their account's bottom line. In other words, employers can succeed only if they have the labour force that enables them to do so. Ultimately, that is the best possible incentive. The Department does provide incentives for employers who take on apprentices. There is a bonus system, by which employers are paid a bonus if they retain an apprentice until the end of the process. If the Member is asking me to examine the bonus system, I am happy to do so and to get back to the Member. Incentives are available, but the principal one is that to have a highly trained apprentice is in an employer's long-term interests. That fact should not be overlooked.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply, which I know was a composite response. I understand that the priority must be the employer, but given that we are talking about thousands of young people whose future and well-being we must consider, is the Minister satisfied that enough discussions are

ongoing with the communities from which those apprentices may be expected to come, in order for him to make a better determination of the industries and sectors that they may be best placed to enter?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

We have had to go down the route that we have taken because the consistent view from colleges and other training providers is that the major obstacle to obtaining placements is the fact that, under the current arrangements, placements are restricted to one day a week. That is one message that I am getting. If we are to try to increase the number of placements, the sensible thing to do is to find a mechanism that will enable us do that. If extending placements to more than one day a week achieves that, I am prepared to consider it as an option.

The Member is probably well aware that the Department has a wide variety of mechanisms in place for speaking to the communities from which the young people come. Workforce-development forums can be found in each regional college in Northern Ireland. The forums work with employers to enable the colleges to produce the kind of programmes that local employers want. It is a demand-led system. Of the apprentices on the programme at present, faced with a choice between having no placement with employers — as many of them are experiencing — or joining the programme-led scheme, thousands of them have decided to go down the latter route. Therefore, the young people have voted with their feet.

The question that we are now addressing is whether we can change the system to give a better opportunity of a work placement. As I said in a previous answer, roughly only 50% of the young people are in a placement, and it is not possible for them to complete their NVQ unless they have workplace experience. We can offer a simulated workplace environment, but that is not the same as working for an employer. I assure the Member that all those matters, including consultation with communities, are very much in our minds.

3.15 pm

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give his assessment of the importance of the programme-led apprenticeship scheme to date? In particular, would many of the young people be forced to go on the dole if it were not for the scheme? Does he accept that if they were not allowed to

complete their apprenticeships, the training that they had received to date would have been lost and that that could affect the economy when it starts to swing upwards again?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

In essence, that is the point at issue. In the absence of proper employer-led apprenticeships in which apprentices have a contract of employment, we decided that we would introduce the programme-led scheme. Almost 3,000 young people joined the scheme when it began, and, undoubtedly, the level and the speed of the take-up indicated that there was a demand for it. In the circumstances, it is important that we try to anchor the young people in a proper environment in which they are learning something and are focused on proper training. If they qualify, they will receive their technical certificates even if they have not undertaken a work placement, so they have opportunities.

The worst thing that we could do for young people would be to leave them on jobseeker's allowance with no proper training and no anchor. All Members know how difficult it is to get young people employed and that it gets more difficult the longer that they remain in that position. We do not want their start in life and their experience of life to be of going into a job centre every fortnight. Therefore, we made the decision to revert to a programme-led scheme. We will take the earliest opportunity to return to the employer-led scheme when we see signs of recovery that will allow us to do so. Until then, we should persevere with the system that was introduced in September 2009.

Economic Policy

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his Department's assessment of the independent review of economic policy. (AQO 807/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Growing a dynamic economy is at the heart of the Executive's Programme for Government, and I welcome the emphasis that that report places on skills and innovation as key drivers of improved productivity and economic growth. In addition, I am mindful that employment and the employability agenda are central to the development of a vibrant and dynamic economy.

The report makes a number of recommendations that are aligned with my Department's strategic direction. For example, my officials are working with Invest NI to develop a model of early engagement with foreign direct investment companies in the manner of the successful model that is used in North Carolina, which is referenced in the report.

I fully endorse the report's analysis that Northern Ireland business must upskill its workforce if it is to maintain and improve its competitiveness in the global market. Effective management and leadership will be critical to that, and my Department is already working closely with Invest NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken in that area. Therefore, I support the broad thrust of the report, and I agree that its recommendations warrant detailed consideration.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the plans that he has put in place to compensate for the future inability to use selective financial assistance to encourage foreign direct investment in areas and the impact that that will have on employment subregions?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member has raised the matter of selective financial assistance, which is the tool that the IDB and, subsequently, Invest NI have used to try to attract foreign direct investment. That takes the form of either a capital grant or an employment grant. However, I understand that that will come to an end shortly under European law and that it will be restricted to a level of support. Members know that that has been coming for a long time. That re-emphasises the fact that, unless we discover large quantities of oil in Craigavon or some other asset that has so far escaped our attention, the only asset that we have at our disposal is people. That is why the skills agenda is so important for training not only people who are entering the labour market but the current workforce, 70% of which will make up the workforce in 2020. The only way to deal with those people is, therefore, through an upskilling process. The skills agenda will be the main tool that Invest NI has at its disposal in the years ahead, once selective financial assistance has been phased out.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister agree that the lacuna in economic policy is the number of young

people who are not in education, employment or training? Will he join me in congratulating organisations, such as the Prince's Trust and those that provide alternative education in my constituency of Strangford, which are doing so much to ensure that that lacuna is fixed properly?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I think that there is a question for oral answer on the issue of young people not in education, employment or training coming up later. The Member may know that my Department gives a lot of resources every year to the Prince's Trust, which is a high-quality organisation. Some of its schemes are more expensive per capita to run than others, but it is trying to get into a harder-to-reach sector of the labour market. It is trying and doing very well, and it is not alone in that.

The Member is correct to say that a significant number of people are not in any of those categories. Some young people are not in education, employment or training by choice, but the majority of them are not in any of those categories because they lack opportunities. That also touches on the fact that — we will have to come to a view on the issue sooner or later — we are continuing to add to that list every year by producing thousands of young people who leave school without having the requisite qualifications. That has resulted in huge problems with illiteracy and innumeracy, and one compounds the other. However, there is a strong motivation in the House to address the issue. There have been a number of debates in the Chamber on the issue, although the Member was obviously not present for those, and I know that it is a high-priority issue for Members.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister give his assessment of the economic importance to Northern Ireland of ensuring that the interests of higher education and further education (FE) are clearly represented in the Executive?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Executive have acknowledged, through the Programme for Government and the economic support that they have given to my Department on the budget and other issues, the emphasis that my Department has placed on further and higher education. The Executive accept that there is a link between further and higher education and economic development and growth. For instance, 34 of the 80 actions set out in the Executive's response to the recession

are down to my Department to implement. That gives the Member some sense of the scale and the importance that the Executive attribute to that.

The Member will know that we have been significantly rebuilding the entire FE estate by building state-of-the-art colleges over the past number of years. We have established the workforce development forum, which is based around the FE sector, to get the message across to employers that they need to work together with the colleges to develop a demand-led programme. The Member will also know that we are investing heavily in higher education through not only the structures and the estate but the significant sums of money that we are investing in the universities. The Member will be aware that we have not slashed the higher education budget, unlike the Government in Great Britain. I hope that, subject to Executive agreement, we will be able to maintain at least a degree of growth in higher education spending, which is not happening in other parts of this country.

Mr Neeson: The report to which the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has already formally responded is very important. Does the Minister for Employment and Learning agree with the recommendation that DETI and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) should become a single Department?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have discussed that matter with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we have responded to the report. We are quite happy to look at that. However, we have to be very careful that we do not replace two Departments that are focused on certain issues with one Department that has such a broad remit that it is not focused at all. We have to make sure that a single Department would not be a stretch too far — covering tourism, consumer affairs, the national geographic survey, the health and safety issues that DETI is responsible for, the issues that DEL is responsible for, and so on. Such a Department may have to deal with issues that are too disparate. There is a happy medium to be found somewhere, and we should be prepared to discuss that. I have already made that clear in my response to the report, and I am quite happy to discuss that issue with the Committee and with others.

We always have to look at how we deliver our policies, and that is a continuous process that Invest NI fits into. I said that we are looking

at new models for working with potential investors. In the next month or so, I hope to be in a position to come to the House with a statement on that, which I am working on with Invest NI and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. That is part of bringing forward policies that are co-ordinated between the various bodies. The work that DETI, DEL and Invest NI do is intensifying, and our ability to deliver policies will be the critical factor. However, I remain prepared to keep an open mind on any proposals that Members have for how that could be dealt with in a structural way.

Welfare Reform

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he, or his Department, has had any discussions with, or representations from, disability groups in relation to the welfare reform Bill. (AQO 808/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Welfare reform legislation is a matter for the Minister for Social Development, who, I understand, is preparing a welfare reform Bill to be brought before the Assembly shortly. I welcome the importance that that will bring to the challenge of reducing economic inactivity and helping people to better access the labour market.

Although we have continuous dialogue with disability groups, they have not made any representations in relation to a welfare reform Bill. We will, of course, be happy to discuss with any interested party aspects of the Bill that, when published, would impact on the Department's business.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his reply. It is unfortunate that there has been no communication on that matter to date. There are concerns that the Bill would have a negative effect on disability groups and on others who are part of that sector. Is the Minister in touch at all with those groups with a view to finding out what would happen to young people who come out of education and placement systems and who are left with nowhere to go, no employment and no further training process? Something needs to be in place to provide a continuation of that process.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am happy to talk to any group. It is not the case that nothing is happening. Over the past few years, the number of people in jobs and benefits

offices who are qualified to address the issues of people with disabilities has risen from 40 to 178. There are Pathways to Work personal advisers, and there are 38 adviser team leaders, many of whom are former disablement advisory officers.

When young people leave school, FE colleges have an obligation, under the terms that they enter into with the Department each year, to address to the best of their ability the needs of young people with disabilities. I have spoken to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and we understand that there are circumstances in which, due to nursing or disability needs, some young people cannot be accommodated in an FE college. It is clearly an issue — it is a criticism that comes up from time to time — if those young people have no alternative but to go into a day centre, with, in some cases, dementia patients and others.

That does not happen everywhere, but it does happen. We are conscious of that, and the FE sector is under no illusions about its obligation to deal with that particular group of people.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Equality Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Equality Bill dealing with the abolition of the presumption of advancement. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Mr O'Loan: I support the motion on a Bill that will, if passed at Westminster, lead to the abolition of the presumption of advancement.

When a person transfers money or property to another person without receiving anything in return, we are told that the standard legal position is that the law presumes that the donor intends to retain the beneficial interest in the value of the money or property. We are further told that, in certain circumstances, the presumption of advancement exists and displaces or reverses the operation of that norm. One example of that, which still applies in Northern Ireland law, is the presumption that property given to a child by his or her father is a gift unless an express statement to the contrary is made at the outset. However, that is not the case when a mother makes a gift to her children.

Although we are told that legal issues or challenges in such circumstances do not happen often, the present situation, nonetheless, is not good law. It breaches the European Convention on Human Rights, specifically article 5 of protocol 7, and we should not be content with that position. Therefore, it is desirable that the amendments to the Bill at Westminster, which seek the abolition of the presumption of advancement, should be supported, and I ask the Assembly to do so.

Dr Farry: My party and I support the legislative consent motion. It is a sensible step to take. Naturally, I welcome the efforts of Lord Lester of Herne Hill, who is a member of the Liberal Democrats — the sister party of the Alliance Party at Westminster — in taking the lead on the issue. It is important that we recognise the times in which we live. The law must move with the times, and it should be gender-neutral and not discriminate in the way in which it is applied. The removal of the last vestiges of the

presumption of advancement is the correct way to do that, and, therefore, I welcome the motion.

The Equality Bill is going through its final legislative stages at Westminster. I am aware of the Minister's strongly held views on the matter. I had the pleasure of channel-hopping one day when I came across a live debate in the House of Commons on BBC Parliament. The Minister was giving off to MPs from all parties about their approach to the Equality Bill. Therefore, I appreciate that there are political reservations about the Bill.

Jennifer McCann made an interesting point about wider equality measures in Northern Ireland and the importance of such matters being taken forward by the Assembly. The Minister, in turn, stressed that the Bill is an exception and that equality measures should be addressed in Northern Ireland. In so far as I am an ideological politician, I am also a pragmatic politician, and I do not see any immediate prospect of a single equality Bill working its way through the Assembly. Such a measure is not mentioned in the Programme for Government, and I appreciate the wider political difficulties that are attached to such legislation. Therefore, did the Executive consider whether it would be pragmatic for Northern Ireland to sign up to wider aspects of the equality legislation? I am particularly mindful that we will now be out of step with equality provisions in the rest of the UK. Although Northern Ireland once had the opportunity to be ahead, we now face the prospect of being somewhat left behind. If we are not willing to or cannot agree in Northern Ireland, was there a prospect that we could have bought into the wider aspects of the equality legislation? I make that comment on behalf of a party that is perhaps enjoying the dying days of opposition. We will give it our best shot and see what the Minister says. I anticipate his response, but I will ask the question anyway.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. The presumption of advancement is a legal term. I do not have a law degree, and I am not able to go into the details, but I was happy to read the Assembly report, in which the situation was explained fully. I accept its findings.

As I understand it, presumption of advancement is one means by which courts allocate ownership of property in situations where one party transfers property to another and where the relationship between the two parties is so close that there is a presumption that the transfer was intended as an absolute gift. That is clear, simple and straight-

forward. In other words, if I decide to gift my wife or sons a sum of money, it is out of my hands, and I no longer have any say or interest in it. Moreover, I cannot expect to receive any interest that the money gains in the bank or through investment. To a simple man like me, it seems obvious that, if I give money to my wife or sons, I will never see it again or enjoy any benefit of it. Everyone knows that has been the case in the past; perhaps it will not be too different in the future.

Hooiniver es bes usual prattick, i Norlin Airlan thaire bes an anomaly an' aa isnae es ye wud alloo hit shud bae. This notion applies adae wi' transfers fae a faither tae a wean bit hit dusnae apply fer transfers fae a mither tae a wean – I thon case the mither wud bae fit tae claim the intherest o' ootcum o' investment.

However, as is usual practice in Northern Ireland, there is an anomaly, and all is not as we assume that it should be. The presumption applies to transfers from a father to a child but does not apply to transfers from a mother to a child. In that case, the mother can reclaim interest that results from investment. In 2005, some of the provisions of presumption were abolished in Northern Ireland, meaning that gifts from wives to husbands were to be treated in the same way as gifts from husbands to wives.

The situation reminds me of a saying that we all know. I notice that there is only one lady in the House. Ladies often say — it is quoted in my house anyway — that, "what's his is mine and what's mine is my own". The law in Northern Ireland has previously backed that situation. I am grateful that it has been abolished and that the law has been changed. The change also applies to engaged couples.

It would have been more cost-effective and time-effective to abolish all the laws at once. However, the current Finance Minister was not in place at that time and, therefore, that could not have happened. As it stands, today's motion simply levels the playing field and ensures that things are seen to be as equal in law as we see them in practice.

The UK Government have asked us to finish what was started in 2005 to allow them to ratify European legislation and, although I am sceptical about the Human Rights Act and European interference, this change is certainly beneficial to and will accommodate the people of the Province. That is why I support the Bill and the legislation. I ask everyone to do the same.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

I apologise for not being in the Chamber for Mr O'Loan's speech. He normally speaks for about an hour and a half. I thought that I would have got back in time from 'Stormont Live' when I saw his name pop up on the screen. However, unfortunately — perhaps fortunately — he decided to cut his contribution to the debate short. I thank Members for contributing to the short debate, and I hope that we will never have occasion to debate the presumption of advancement in the Chamber again.

I will deal with just a couple of issues that Members raised. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel raised the issue of legislative consent and said that she hoped that that procedure would not be used either again or regularly. We have used legislative consent motions on a number of occasions in the House because we deemed it an easier and quicker way to make progress on certain matters on the back of Westminster legislation. Given, as Members said, the unlikelihood that a single equality Bill will be brought forward in Northern Ireland for some time, the Equality Bill was the quickest way of dealing with the presumption of advancement. The matter had been outstanding since 1997 and had to be cleared up if the Government were to sign up to protocol 7. The legislative consent motion is an appropriate way of dealing with the issue. It is uncontroversial, and there is no need for separate legislation to be brought to the Assembly. I assure the Chairperson of the Committee that we would not want to use the procedure regularly.

Mr Farry asked whether there was any chance that we would introduce the wider aspects of the Bill, which do not apply here, to Northern Ireland. He asked that question tongue-in-cheek, because he knew the answer anyway, since we had used the Westminster Equality Bill to carry forward this part of the equality agenda. As far as I am concerned, the answer is an emphatic no on a number of grounds.

The Equality Bill went through the House of Commons in a scandalous fashion. The legislation had wide-ranging implications, and there was considerable opposition to it. It was guillotined so that debate on a range of issues could not take place. If I remember rightly, approximately 80% of the proposed amendments to the Bill were never even discussed. I am sure that Mr Farry would not

want us to introduce legislation that could go through in the same shoddy form in which the Equality Bill proceeded through the House of Commons. Indeed, I suspect that, had we tried to bring legislation through the Assembly in the way in which the Equality Bill was railroaded through the House of Commons, Members would be howling from the Benches on all sides that it was not a good way to do business.

I have significant opposition to a number of aspects of the Bill. I am sure that Mr Farry and many of his constituents have expressed concern about the way in which the Equality Bill will force Church and religious organisations to employ people who are not sympathetic to the views of those organisations. As I pointed out, there is a certain degree of hypocrisy in that political parties have safeguarded themselves against that kind of eventuality by insisting that the equality legislation does not apply to them because they could not possibly employ a researcher who had different political beliefs, for example. Yet they would expect a Church organisation to employ a youth worker who had no beliefs to work with young people, even though that organisation expects those workers to hold certain values.

I am digressing, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought that you would have stopped me by now, but, since the Member raised the issue and you have not stopped me, I will not go any further.

I worried about Mr Shannon. It took me long enough to get my head around the presumption of advancement and the presumption of trust, which is what I think he said. Mr Shannon went further; he started to debate the issue in Ulster Scots. I found it difficult enough to understand his contribution in English, let alone having it conveyed to me in Ulster Scots. I will not address his point, other than to note that he welcomed the equal treatment of men and women when it comes to passing assets on to their families.

I thank Members for contributing to the debate, and I am glad that we have got it out of the way.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Equality Bill dealing with the abolition of the presumption of advancement.

3.45 pm

Committee Business

Motions to Amend Standing Orders

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next two motions provide for related amendments to Standing Orders, so I propose to group the motions and conduct one debate. I will call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move motion (a). The debate will then take place on both motions. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on motion (a). I will then ask the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures formally to move motion (b), and I will then put the Question on that motion without further debate. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow): I beg to move

(a) Leave out Standing Orders 66 to 68 and insert —

“66. PUBLIC ACCESS TO ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

(1) Members of the public seeking to attend proceedings of the Assembly shall be permitted in such places reserved for them by the Speaker save that —

(a) they are not permitted in the Public Gallery during Prayers;

(b) they are not permitted to have any item in the Public Gallery which in the opinion of the Speaker could interfere with the preservation of order; and

(c) the Speaker may, in the interests of preserving order, require them to leave.

(2) Where the proceedings are committee proceedings, members of the public shall be permitted in such places reserved for them by the chairperson of the committee save that —

(a) they are not permitted to have any item in a public area which in the opinion of the chairperson could interfere with the preservation of order;

(b) the chairperson may, in the interests of preserving order, require them to leave; and

(c) the committee may resolve to sit in closed session.

(3) An authorised person may, during proceedings of the Assembly, lawfully remove any member of the public who is —

(a) in breach of paragraph (1) or (2);

(b) in a place reserved for members of the Assembly; or

(c) acting in a disorderly manner.

(4) In this order ‘authorised person’ means —

(a) the Speaker or a person authorised by the Speaker;

(b) in the case of committee proceedings, the chairperson or a person authorised by the chairperson.

(5) This order applies whether the proceedings are carried on in Parliament Buildings or in some other place.

(6) These provisions are without prejudice to any other functions of the Speaker, the Assembly Commission or an authorised person in respect of Parliament Buildings which may be exercised by virtue of any other statutory provision or rule of law.

67. MEDIA ACCESS TO ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

Standing Order 66 applies to the media as if —

(a) references to members of the public were references to members of the media;

(b) references to the Public Gallery were references to the Press Gallery; and

(c) references to public areas were references to areas reserved for the media.”

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

(b) Leave out Standing Order 74. — [The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I proceed to the Question, I remind Members — I apologise: Lord Morrow will address the gathering.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures:

There are three separate Standing Orders dealing with Assembly visitors. Standing Order 66 deals with visitors to the Assembly, Standing Order 67 deals with visitors to Committees, and Standing Order 68 gives power to the director of properties to remove visitors in certain circumstances. In addition, Standing Order 74 deals with members of the news media in Parliament Buildings.

The motions provide for a consolidation of Standing Orders 66, 67 and 68 while retaining a separate Standing Order on the media. The aim is to ensure that Standing Orders are clear and concise and that they accurately reflect the powers of the Speaker and Committee Chairpersons.

The amended Standing Order 66 will deal comprehensively with public access to Assembly proceedings. It will refer to “members of the

public” rather than “visitors”. That will remove any confusion over the definition of “visitor”, such as whether someone working in the Building whose work is not directly related to Assembly proceedings is a visitor.

The Standing Order will use the terminology used in section 41 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998:

“(1) The proceedings of the Assembly shall be regulated by standing orders.”

However, some of the Standing Orders seem to go beyond what is authorised in the legislation in that they attempt to regulate matters other than proceedings of the Assembly. That could leave the Assembly open to challenge. The proposed amendment will give the Speaker a power over access during proceedings of the Assembly rather than a general power to regulate access at all times when the Assembly is sitting. That will cover proceedings of the Assembly carried out in Parliament Buildings or anywhere else. That will make more sense, given the Assembly Commission’s engagement strategy, particularly as Committees now hold meetings outside the Building more regularly.

The day-to-day responsibility for public access to Parliament Buildings lies with the Assembly’s properties directorate, which ensures that health and safety, security regulations and so on are observed at all times. The current Standing Order 68, which covers the director of properties, was based largely on Westminster’s, and the language used is not entirely consistent with the rest of the Assembly’s Standing Orders.

There was also an issue about whether doorkeeping staff can physically remove any visitor when asked to do so by the Speaker or a Committee Chairperson. To provide for that, the words to be included in the Standing Order are:

“lawful removal of any member of the public”

Amendments also introduce the term “authorised person” instead of “the director of properties” so that, if that job title is changed, Standing Orders will not have to be amended. Standing Order 68 has now been consolidated within the new Standing Order 66.

The current Standing Order 74, which deals with the news media and their access to the Assembly, was affected by the new arrangements for the media that were agreed by the Assembly Commission. That Standing Order lists the devices that can be brought

into the Assembly, and it outlines that, given technological developments, the list can be added to every month. The detail of how the media operate in Parliament Buildings is now set out in the media handbook. Therefore, that detail does not need to be set out in Standing Orders. Standing Order 74 now becomes new Standing Order 67. To include all forms of media, such as the specialist journalists who cover the work of Committees, it refers to “media” instead of “news media”. It makes clear that the rules of public access apply to the media.

The proposed amendments to consolidate Standing Orders 66, 67 and 68 into one Standing Order 66 and to maintain a new separate Standing Order 67 make Standing Orders clearer and more concise.

Members may wish to note that a number of amendments to Standing Orders will be brought to the House in coming months. In the interest of the environment and efficiency procedures, Committee staff will attempt to reduce the number of pages that need to be printed when Standing Orders are amended. When Members receive the next set of amendments, there may be some blank sections; for example, between Standing Order 73 and Standing Order 75. That will be addressed when the Committee amends Standing Order 73 in the near future. There will be no need to reprint four double-sided pages for more than 300 sets of amendments. That will save money and help the environment. I have no doubt that that is all crystal clear.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chathaoirleach as an obair atá déanta aige ar an rún seo. I thank the Chairperson for outlining the rationale for the changes to Standing Orders. I also thank him and the Committee staff for their work in taking us through the process. We understand the rationale and the need for the changes, and we support them.

Lord Browne: I also welcome the amendments to Standing Orders 66, 67 and 68 and thank the Chairperson and the Committee staff for the excellent work that they have done to bring the amendments forward today. It is pleasing that so many members of the public come to observe the Assembly at work. I hope that that trend will continue, although there are not too many in the Public Gallery at the moment. It is important that, while promoting easy access, we

ensure that order is maintained in the Chamber and the Public Gallery at all times.

The amendments are good steps towards simplifying the arrangements and rules regarding public access to the Assembly. They go a long way towards clarifying the uncertainties that could have arisen from the existing Standing Orders. We now have clear, precise Standing Orders that cover all visitor access to all buildings. The amendments mean that we can be clear about what constitutes a breach of order and how to deal with it. I hope, of course, that such a situation will not arise, but at least we will be prepared for it. I am confident that the Assembly will continue to operate in an efficient manner and that its operation will remain fully transparent to the public. With Deputy Speakers such as you, I am sure that that will be the case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is a rare occasion on which it is permissible to refer to the Public Gallery.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Storey): I wish that it was always as easy a task to conclude a debate in the House. The debate has been riveting, and I can add little to what has been said. The Committee on Procedures largely concentrates its efforts on tidying up and consolidating Standing Orders, apart from when new legislation is enacted or when policies that require changes are introduced. Therefore, the Committee Chairperson has adequately set out what will happen with reprints of the Standing Orders handbook. Obviously, there will be amendments that will be reprinted in full in the summer. The amendments before the House today, therefore, are primarily a tidying-up exercise, and I commend them to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(a) Leave out Standing Orders 66 to 68 and insert –
“66. PUBLIC ACCESS TO ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

(1) Members of the public seeking to attend proceedings of the Assembly shall be permitted in such places reserved for them by the Speaker save that –

(a) they are not permitted in the Public Gallery during Prayers;

(b) they are not permitted to have any item in the Public Gallery which in the opinion of the Speaker could interfere with the preservation of order; and

(c) the Speaker may, in the interests of preserving order, require them to leave.

(2) Where the proceedings are committee proceedings, members of the public shall be permitted in such places reserved for them by the chairperson of the committee save that –

(a) they are not permitted to have any item in a public area which in the opinion of the chairperson could interfere with the preservation of order;

(b) the chairperson may, in the interests of preserving order, require them to leave; and

(c) the committee may resolve to sit in closed session.

(3) An authorised person may, during proceedings of the Assembly, lawfully remove any member of the public who is –

(a) in breach of paragraph (1) or (2);

(b) in a place reserved for members of the Assembly; or

(c) acting in a disorderly manner.

(4) In this order ‘authorised person’ means –

(a) the Speaker or a person authorised by the Speaker;

(b) in the case of committee proceedings, the chairperson or a person authorised by the chairperson.

(5) This order applies whether the proceedings are carried on in Parliament Buildings or in some other place.

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67. MEDIA ACCESS TO ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

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(a) references to members of the public were references to members of the media;

(b) references to the Public Gallery were references to the Press Gallery; and

(c) references to public areas were references to areas reserved for the media.”

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(b) Leave out Standing Order 74 — [The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow).]

Private Members' Business

Local Government Reform

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes 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 Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the ongoing uncertainty and delay in the local government reform programme; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to advise when the relevant legislation will be put to the Executive and the Assembly for approval.

I declare an interest as a Carrickfergus councillor and as a recent appointee to the strategic leadership board.

The Executive had three major areas for the reform of public administration: health, education and local government. Michael McGimpsey, MLA, the Ulster Unionist Health Minister, is the only Minister to have succeeded in bringing about reforms that reduce government bureaucracy and the number of trusts and quangos, with a view to improving services. The Department of Education, which has a new education and skills authority, is in paralysis. The reform of local government is stumbling from one crisis to another. The DUP and Sinn Féin have failed in their major responsibility of enabling the reform of public administration. Considering the history of those two parties, we should not be surprised that they are not built for effective leadership in the Northern Ireland Executive, and the people of Northern Ireland are beginning to come to that realisation.

This is a probing motion. The Ulster Unionist Party wants the Minister to give an honest appraisal of where we are with the reform of local government. There is widespread uncertainty in councils. Already, there is a risk of key jobs being vacant. A new procedure will limit the ability to fill vacancies. Employees and councillors are uncertain about what the future holds. That can affect the morale and performance of staff members, so it ought to be of concern to the Assembly and ratepayers.

We have serious reservations about the direction of the reform programme, and we want to know the short-term intentions, because we are hitting a critical period. There are major issues of costs and savings, and, significantly, the issue of boundaries has still to be finalised after some three years of this Assembly being in operation. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that the overriding reason for the uncertainty is that aspects of the local government reform package have been driven unamended through the Assembly, some through the use of accelerated passage. No real scrutiny was possible, and, even now, some DUP and Sinn Féin Members are growing uncomfortable with the proposals that will flow from it.

4.00 pm

Mr Weir: I thought that the Member's problem was the delay in local government reform, but he now seems to be complaining about measures being driven through. Either things are moving through too quickly without proper scrutiny, or there are delays. Which case is being made?

Mr Beggs: I am very confused about the manner of government here because, on one hand, we are told about the need for accelerated passage, and, on the other, the Executive did not meet for 154 days, no business was done and the Assembly twiddled its thumbs. There are real questions about how Executive matters are managed and how decisions are made.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I will proceed with my speech, or I may get stalled at this point. Even now, some DUP and Sinn Féin Members are uncomfortable with the proposals.

There is discontent among local communities. The 11-council model that was agreed by the DUP and Sinn Féin was considered quite strange. The Ulster Unionist Party favoured a logical 15-council model that used accepted and established boundaries. That model included a degree of accountability, and it would have been much more streamlined because organisations could have been more closely identified with regions, instead of having to deal with the cross-over boundaries that will come into existence.

The Local Government (Boundaries) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 states:

"The 11 local government districts shall incorporate, respectively, the whole or major part of the following former local government districts —"

It then names the various districts. The Ulster Unionist Party warned the DUP that the boundaries legislation did not allow the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to make significant changes, nor the flexibility to recognise the importance of the identities of local communities when making decisions. We supported and tabled a number of amendments that were designed to achieve that best outcome, but the DUP and Sinn Féin drove through their flawed proposals. They rejected all the ideas from a range of parties that would have allowed flexibility in respect of the final boundaries.

Arlene Foster, the then Minister of the Environment, stated that she did:

“not accept that the commissioner will not have the ability to make meaningful change. The legislation provides the commissioner with that ability — it is certainly not a straitjacket”. — [Official Report, Bound Volume 30, p67, col 1].

Those were strong words, but that did not prove to be what happened in practice. The commissioner's provisional recommendations stated that he believed that “major part” was a spatial term, which meant that he was straitjacketed by the legislation and its failure to recognise the importance of local identity.

In November 2009, Edwin Poots, who was the third Minister of the Environment in three years, stated that the boundary that would incorporate Dunmurry into Belfast rather than Lisburn did not make sense. Many people would agree. Unfortunately, however, the guidelines that were set by the DUP and Sinn Féin at the time resulted in those outcomes. There is little point in complaining about the outcome when they set the guidance by which the commissioner must operate. Does the Minister deny that the main reason why the people of Dunmurry want to stay in Lisburn is because they identify primarily with that area? That is the way in which the flawed legislation was set up at the time.

Why did the DUP and Sinn Féin reject the Ulster Unionists' amendment No 11, which would have allowed the commissioner to take local identity into consideration? That would have reflected wording that has been applied elsewhere. There is no point in complaining about the outcome now. The decision was taken at the time to reject constructive amendments.

The Ulster Unionist Party also has serious reservations about financial planning for local

government reform. The recommended option projects savings of some £438 million over 25 years, with an initial outlay of £118 million. That will result in some savings, but we have to appreciate that risks are involved in any change. There are always risks when consultants make their estimations. I understand that there are not sufficient funds in the Department of Finance and Personnel to take that risk. The Department wants to pass on that risk by way of a loan to local government, which would have to bear the burden of repaying that loan.

The PWC estimates are based on the outworking of reorganisation in local government in other parts of the UK. In many instances, savings, rather than actually being achieved, are only projected to be achieved. Those projected savings are attributed to councils with considerably different responsibilities; many have to deliver on items such as social services, education, roads and policing, none of which it is proposed to devolve to local government here. It is a different model, with different powers. Again, risks are involved in that aspect of change.

The Ulster Unionist Party is not convinced by what has been presented to date. We are undergoing a massive reform programme, with considerable risks, for what appear to be relatively limited financial gains. There have also been threats about early elections. Later, we were told that there was no need for concern. Last week, the Minister threatened to pull the plug on the entire local government reform process. The Minister is presiding over confusion.

Apparently, the Minister has given local councils until 25 February to agree with his plans, which, I assume, will achieve savings by creating a single waste authority and a business service organisation. However, as a local councillor, I am not aware of any relevant motions before council. We have been told that we are waiting for councils; it would be helpful if the Minister would clarify whether he is waiting for feedback from NILGA, rather than from individual councils. If a business service organisation is to be established as a statutory body, we are in danger of creating another LPS rates nightmare, with demands being made for payment, irrespective of performance. There are huge risks associated with that.

Those are the reasons for our concerns, and there has been a lack of leadership by the DUP on the issue. Ratepayers are concerned, and

council staff seem to be in a sort of limbo land, so it would be helpful if the Minister would tell Members when concrete proposals will be brought forward so that the Assembly might express its views.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber. As a member of Craigavon Borough Council and of the voluntary transition committee for Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, I declare an interest.

I shall speak first on behalf of the Committee for the Environment and then on my own behalf. The Minister briefed the Committee on the progress of RPA at its meeting on 3 December 2009. The main areas of discussion were policy proposals; timing; the possibility of a single waste disposal authority and of a single business service organisation; the PWC economic appraisal on RPA; planning; costs; and transition committees. At the meeting, the Minister indicated that the pressure was off on the timing of legislation on the new local government boundaries because the UK Government are not planning to hold local government elections in May 2010. That prompted Minister Goggins to write to the Minister of the Environment to reiterate that legislation on local government boundaries must be brought forward urgently. Indeed, he stated that if legislation was not brought to the Assembly in January 2010, it would be virtually impossible:

"to hold elections in May 2011 on the basis of the new local government structure."

As we near the end of February, there is still no sign of the legislation, so what chance do we have of introducing the new local government structures?

More recently, at its meeting on 8 February, the Committee considered a letter from the Minister about the cost of RPA, in which he indicated that he and the Finance Minister had discussed costs and that the feeling was that costs should be split between central and local government. The Committee then wrote to ask the Minister to indicate the likely split and to ask whether he would reconsider his selection of option 5 in the PWC economic appraisal should it become apparent that one of the other four options was preferable. As the House is probably aware, option 5 includes establishing

a single waste disposal authority and a single business management organisation for back-room services. The Committee has been made aware that local authorities and waste groups have concerns about that approach, and we want to know whether the Minister will take those concerns on board or persist with his preferred option.

The Committee is concerned about the review of public administration process. In addition to increasing concerns among elected members, the Committee has been made aware of demotivated staff in local authorities and in central government Departments. It also appears that there is an information vacuum due to lack of communication and understandable confusion about the process. Any legislation associated with the process must be given every opportunity for scrutiny by this place, and, as Committee Chairperson, I call on the Minister to bring forward the legislation as soon as possible and not to resort to accelerated passage.

I will now express some personal opinions. In the past week, the Finance Minister said that if the changes are to benefit local government, local government should bear the brunt, because that is where the savings would be made. However, that is unsustainable. In the past few weeks, the Minister criticised local government for increasing and, in some cases, rightly so, the domestic rate higher than it ought to have been, but we could be faced with a £118 million upfront investment over five years to be borne by local councils if central government does not pick up any of that money. That is unacceptable.

Some 9,000 staff are employed in local councils, and 1,000 staff are to be transferred to local councils. All those people are wondering what the future holds. I accept that there will be little change for the majority of staff, but there will be a great deal of change and job losses for the most senior staff. The citizen is supposed to be at the centre of all the process in respect of cost effectiveness, efficiency and better delivery of services. Therefore, there is a pressing need for people to know the financial split, and I ask the Minister to clarify that if he can this afternoon.

Finally, given the state of the Planning Service, as we found out in last week's PAC report, and given the shortfall in the Budget, there are costs in relation to the planning transfers

that will have to be picked up. Regardless of which Department is transferring responsibility, I ask the Minister to ensure that whatever new functions and responsibilities come to local councils resources will follow the function.

Mr Weir: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, as a member of the transition committee for North Down and Ards, as the vice-president of the Local Government Association, and as a member of policy development panel A. I am not a member of the strategic leadership board, but I must admit that I was surprised by some of Mr Beggs's remarks; he should have been much better informed in his speech.

I have sympathy with the motion, because there is an argument that there has been a delay. However, it has not been the fault of the Minister or the Department. The Minister has put forward proposals in respect of the boundaries Order and the local government reorganisation Bill, which have yet to get clearance from the Executive. Therefore, there is an argument that there has been a delay.

I do not have a particular problem with the motion, although I disagree with just about every point in the proposer's speech. I take exception to being lectured by the Ulster Unionist Party on delay in local government reform. After all, it was Minister Foster who led on that more than a decade ago. Indeed, during the Ulster Unionist tenure, local government reform went absolutely nowhere. In the run-up to the 2001 election, I remember being told by various Ulster Unionists that the issue would be sorted out within 12 months and that perhaps the 2001 election would be postponed. Yet it seemed to disappear into the ether. Therefore, I will take no lectures on that front.

Similarly, there seems to be an attempt to rerun the boundaries decision. The position was that an 11-council model was agreed by the Assembly. The spurious nonsense that we have heard about the terms of reference in the legislation beggars belief. Indeed, the Member quoted the boundary commissioner as saying that the spatial terms were one of the key factors in relation to it. That would have allowed a vast amount of transfer between councils. Indeed, a majority of the population of Castlereagh, for instance, could have moved into Belfast, had the boundary commissioner so decided.

Therefore, with regard to the dispute about Dunmurry, it was perfectly feasible, under the legislation, for Dunmurry to have remained in Lisburn or to have moved into Belfast. Indeed, there was absolutely nothing in the legislation to prevent either option. Many misconceptions are being peddled about the Boundary Commission.

4.15 pm

Similarly, with regard to costs and savings, the Minister has made it clear that local-government reform is about the delivery of best value for ratepayers. I would have thought that that was the key element of all this. Consequently, there needs to be realism in local government. Whether it means adopting the precise terms of the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, or something else, the key driver will be a process that delivers savings to the ratepayer. Therefore, acceptance of collaboration is needed. Collaboration is sensible and well-founded. I suspect that some people believe that the situation can simply continue as it is. The Minister tried to bring a note of realism to the debate in that regard.

Undoubtedly, any change process will be front-loaded with regard to costs. I defy anyone to name any major change that is not. If effort is made on collaboration and people are prepared to face up to their responsibilities, economies of scale are such that that can bring savings in the long run. That means that there needs to be acceptance that some empires will have to go.

There is a fundamental principle that costs should follow the event and, indeed, that they should, ultimately, be neutral for ratepayers. Consequently, local ratepayers should not bear the burden of the cost of transferring functions. That has been accepted. Similarly, it is not realistic to say that someone else can pick up all the costs of change but that local government can keep all the savings: the two must tie in. That is logical.

Let us be honest; if it is a question of costs being picked up by someone else and savings being made by ratepayers, they are actually being shifted from one person to another. It means that costs will be picked up by taxpayers and savings will be made by ratepayers. One must go alongside the other. That is simple logic.

There is an onus on the Executive to move forward. The Minister's proposals can bear fruit. Collaboration issues can be sorted out by the

Strategic Leadership Board, of which Mr Beggs is a member. Perhaps, he should be a little bit better informed about what is coming up at the board than the tone of his remarks suggests.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Thank God, I do not have to make any declarations, unlike Mr Weir.

At the outset, I want to comment on what Sinn Féin sees as the main concerns of people who are involved with the transition of local government and how those concerns actually affect the Minister's thinking on RPA. The debate is about delay. I want to explore the issues that have caused that delay.

Sinn Féin does not believe that the formation of a business service organisation and a single waste authority, as detailed in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, will necessarily deliver for local communities and achieve the efficiencies and savings that are mentioned in that report. At local-council level, the business service organisation has been unilaterally rejected. If it were created, it would be a body that would oversee functions such as procurement, legal services, IT, etc. There is widespread belief that that will, in fact, lead to a reduction in services, particularly at local level, and will help to pave the way for a privatisation agenda. Despite the Department of the Environment's (DOE) assurances that it would be under the ownership of local government, it could, in all probability, be directed and manipulated by the Department and could become a large, cumbersome organisation that is out of touch with local community aspirations.

NILGA has stated that there is no overall agreement on the creation of a single waste authority either. In particular, it has been rejected by the Southern Waste Management Partnership (SWaMP) and the North West Region Waste Management Group. Sinn Féin believes that new council structures should be given an opportunity to bed down before the Assembly looks at any possible model or arrangements for a single waste authority.

At present, the three groups are progressing with their own unique plans that are tailored to meet their own specific needs. Two of the groups are at advanced stages of tendering and procurement and are on line to meet their targets. Any interference or uncertainties at

this stage of the process could jeopardise those proposals.

Unfortunately, there is a belief that the Minister is letting personal issues cloud his thinking. It is thought that his rationale for delaying local government reform, or even, as some say, his contemplation of its collapse, is that he does not agree with the boundary commissioner's report that dissects Dunmurry and parts of Castlereagh, and the subsequent rates issues in his constituency that arise from the report. The Minister has failed to get the support of OFMDFM and other Ministers in his party to change the boundaries, and it is the view of many that he is prepared to delay or even collapse the process for that reason.

Also, there is widespread frustration, anger and disbelief in the local government sector and among DOE officials at the lack of progress and at the potential imminent collapse of the reform process. Much work, finance, time and effort has gone into the process over many years. If it collapses, that will have significant consequences for all.

My colleague Paul Maskey will talk about the PAC report on the performance of the Planning Service, which has a major impact on the RPA.

Sinn Féin calls on the Minister to address the issue as a matter of urgency and to implement the RPA without undue delay, as it is the wish of local councillors and many Assembly Members. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Dr Farry: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council and the North Down and Ards transition committee. My list of declaration of interests is not as long as that of my colleague Peter Weir.

There are genuine concerns in local government and in the wider community at the ongoing delays and uncertainty over the local government aspects of the review of public administration. We are faced with a situation in which it may not be possible to meet the May 2011 deadline for reform. Given that that target date has been telegraphed for so long, the fact that we could jeopardise the RPA in its final stages beggars belief. It is not a good advertisement for the Assembly or its ability to carry through and sustain a reform programme in Northern Ireland.

It seems that two issues are causing the immediate crisis. One relates to the boundaries, and the other relates to the fallout from the PricewaterhouseCoopers report and the potential for shared services and arguments about the costs and savings projections. Even if those two issues are to be resolved over the next weeks or, hopefully, days, the timetable to May 2011 will be an onerous deadline for the Assembly and local government to meet, because there is significant legislation to be processed. There is also a sense that transition committees have been almost on a go-slow over the past number of months, and I speak from experience in that regard. They are uncertain as to what the future holds, and they are unwilling to overcommit themselves.

The Alliance Party is concerned about what is happening with the boundary commission process. I am not here to cast aspersions as to whether things are being delayed by the DUP, Sinn Féin or another party in the Executive. However, boundary commission processes are supposed to be neutral and apolitical, and there is a reason why they are carried out in that way. Under the British constitution, there is a strong tradition that decisions regarding boundaries are farmed out to independent commissions, because such decisions have massive political and electoral ramifications. Commission reports are laid before Parliament, or, in our case, the Assembly, and are accepted by politicians without amendment. Once we go down the route of unpicking such reports, where do we stop? To do so would undermine the integrity of the process. To engage in that process in Northern Ireland, is dangerous, particularly because of the history of this society. This should be the last part of the United Kingdom in which politicians are attempting to reopen such issues, rather than being the region at the head of the queue. Leaving aside the merits of what is, or is not, being proposed, we should have a hands-off approach.

Like Mr Beggs, I do not agree with the entire remit of the Boundaries Commissioner, but once the Boundaries Commissioner was in place, he was entitled to make a mess, if a mess is what he makes. In the interest of the integrity of the democratic process, it is my duty as a public representative to accept that, and that should be the case with respect to that boundary.

There are issues regarding confidence in the figures that were presented in the PWC report.

There is not faith in the estimated costs for what RPA is going to involve at a local level or in what the savings are going to be. There is almost a sense that the costs are set at the lower end and the savings are set at the upper end. We have a figure for the potential long-term net saving, but there is a lot of scepticism as to whether that will be delivered in practice.

Although savings may well work their way out over 25 years, the costs will have to be borne by somebody, whether it is the Assembly, the councils or a combination of both in the short term. New councils will have a difficult job establishing their credibility with the elector, particularly in the context of a difficult financial situation. I have no difficulty with shared services as a concept: it makes sense. It is a process that has to be bottom-up rather than necessarily being top-down. That is the crux of local government concerns.

This is an important issue for the Assembly and the Minister —

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

Dr Farry: It is critical for the credibility of these institutions that we get to sort it out over the days to come.

Mr Ross: When my colleague spoke he said that initially, when we looked at the Order Paper, we saw the motion as something that we would be inclined to support, because we believe that there are genuine concerns out there, that there is a degree of uncertainty and that people are, quite rightly, concerned about what is happening in the RPA process. However, I must say that the way that Mr Beggs presented this argument, first blaming the Sinn Féin/DUP axis — as the Ulster Unionist repeatedly say — for everything, is a fairly immature way to approach the debate.

In the course of Mr Beggs's speech, it became clear that this is another case of the Ulster Unionist Party having a difficulty with legislation that has already been passed in the Assembly and that that party has issues with the 11-council model. The UUP has, legitimately enough, different ideas about how many councils we should have, but its members need to recognise that that is something on which the Assembly has already voiced its opinion and passed legislation.

As I said, there are legitimate concerns about the uncertainty that exists, not just among staff but among some elements of the public, although I must say that the hold-up in the RPA process is not something that the public are banging on doors or protesting in the streets about. We want to see that process completed; it is something that everyone in this House has spoken in favour of. I certainly want to see the streamlining of local government and local government being made stronger and more effective.

However, it is also important that we see efficiencies in the longer term. Part of the process of shrinking local government and having the 11-council model must be that we see those efficiencies. Indeed, we will talk about that whole process tomorrow in the House with the Final Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. We are not sure from Mr Beggs's speech at the start of the debate whether that piece of legislation has been driven through or delayed; however, we will see that piece of legislation completed in the House tomorrow, all being well.

There are other aspects of local government on which we are seeing progress; for example, the finance aspect of local government legislation should be introduced to the House soon. Today, we in this House must reaffirm our commitment to seeing the RPA process completed and seeing the transition to streamlined local government.

That will involve challenges for local government, not least, as we have heard previously in this debate, with regard to the single waste authority and the business services organisation. However, those are the sorts of services that can be delivered so that we get to the level of efficiency and efficiency savings that we want to. As my colleague Mr Weir said, even if it is not right to the letter of the PWC report, we must look for efficiencies to be delivered by local government, which cannot shy away from that responsibility.

We have spent many hours on this issue in the Committee. I know that the strategic leadership board has spent many hours on this, as have the transition committees that were set up from the existing councils. We must remain focused on our end goal, which has to be value for money for ratepayers.

4.30 pm

I said at the beginning of my contribution that there were some concerns, and Members

highlighted some of them. Therefore, it would be helpful if the Minister could deal with those concerns in his speech. The issue of boundaries has been mentioned, and it would be useful to hear more about that. It would also be useful if the Minister could outline whether we are still on track for the delivery of RPA and local council elections in May 2011.

The Assembly will debate the Final Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill tomorrow. However, other legislation needs to go through the House. If there are delays in any of that legislation, such as that that will deal with the reorganisation of local councils, it would be useful if the Minister could highlight any concerns and difficulties and give us more information on the area of the machinery of government that is holding up the process.

Overall, the motion is worded in such a way that means that most of us could support it, in that it highlights areas of genuine concern. I hope that we will see progress in the next week on the issues that are causing difficulty. I hope that local government recognises that it is important that it shows efficiencies and puts in place the measures that are needed to find efficiencies in the long term.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion, as it calls for the removal of the uncertainty that exists on local government reform. The Minister has created that uncertainty, particularly through the decision that he made on the Boundary Commission's proposals. I point out to the mover of the motion that it is wrong to try to portray the situation as some spat or fight between Sinn Féin and the DUP. The problem lies with the Boundary Commission's proposals and with the Minister and the DUP in particular.

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

The motion deals with a whole range of issues to do with, for example, the business services organisation and the single waste authority. Indeed, Cathal Boylan gave Sinn Féin's position on that. There are also issues connected to rates to consider. However, we can leave those issues aside, because they can be dealt with.

I should have declared that I am a member of Lisburn City Council and a member of the Lisburn and Castlereagh transition committee.

I read a speech that the Minister made to NILGA on 18 February in which he talked about putting the process of local government in jeopardy. He also talked about protectionism. However, the Minister has jeopardised the whole process of local government reform and has engaged in protectionism, or what some people might call gerrymandering, with regard to Dunmurry, which is in his backyard. The process cannot be held up on the issue of whether one ward stays in Lisburn or moves to Belfast. I know that there are issues with the Castlereagh area, given that the DUP in Castlereagh Borough Council wants to hold on to some areas and not have them moved into the Belfast area. However, it is wrong to hold the whole process in jeopardy because of that.

The Boundary Commission held a series of meetings and had consultations on the issue right across Lisburn and Belfast. Provisional recommendations were made, final recommendations were made, and the matter also went to a public inquiry. On each occasion, the decision was that Dunmurry and some parts of Castlereagh would move to Belfast. We must all accept the situation. I am telling Roy Beggs that this is not a row between Sinn Féin and the DUP; it is about us all accepting the outcome of the Boundaries Commissioner's proposals. I welcome the comments that Stephen Farry of the Alliance Party made on that matter. The issues that are holding up the situation include, for example, when the single waste authority will be introduced and the business service model. However, those matters can be worked out.

As I said, there is an issue with rates. Areas that I represent as a councillor, such as Twinbrook and Poleglass, will be moving into the Belfast area. I am conscious that the Minister made comments about local councils setting rates. Some councils have set their rates two or three times above the rate of inflation, and others have not. I welcome the fact that Lisburn City Council set its rates below the rate of inflation.

However, we must get round the issue of boundaries. It is such a sensitive issue. In his own council area, the Minister is putting party politics and the self-interest of the DUP above the process of local government reform with the issue of Dunmurry, and there is no justification for it. If the Minister tells us today that he accepts the Boundaries Commissioner's proposals, that will send out a clear message. I recognise that the Minister has a difficult task;

it is not all negative attacks. I also recognise that no matter which Minister is involved in the process of local government reform, there will be people with vested interests who will try to stop it and to put obstacles in the way. However, he is creating more obstacles and digging a bigger hole for himself by digging in on the issue of Dunmurry.

If that issue was cleared up, a fair wind would be created and all political parties would try to work with the Minister on the other outstanding issues that we are all having difficulties dealing with. We are moving from 26 councils to 11, and obviously there will be difficulties. The view of the people is that the Assembly and the Minister are putting party politics before the future of local government and tampering with a fairly independent process. Everyone accepted that the Boundaries Commissioner, Dick Mackenzie, was independent and had no vested interest. Sinn Féin might not have been happy, but we would have accepted it if Dunmurry had remained in Lisburn.

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

Mr Butler: Sinn Féin welcomes the motion. We must try to get some certainty.

Mr I McCrea: From the outset, I declare my interest as a member of Cookstown District Council and a member of the transition committee for Cookstown, Magherafelt and Dungannon.

As stated by my party colleagues, the DUP supports the motion and has no difficulty in agreeing with what it says. However, I am disappointed by the comments that Mr Beggs made in proposing the motion. It was an unfair assessment and a demonstration of his desire to make party-political snipes at my party and Sinn Féin.

I support the motion. In its wording, there are certainly questions that should be asked. Are there any pieces of legislation being held up by the First Minister or the deputy First Minister for party-political reasons? Mr Butler and Mr Boylan have informed the House that they will not be supporting a single waste authority or a single business services organisation. If that is not holding up the process, I do not know what is. Mr Butler attacked the Minister for what he perceived as the Minister holding things up, yet the two Sinn Féin Members have stated that

their intention is to hold up the process if they do not get what they want. Perhaps I have taken it up wrong, but that is certainly how I read what was said.

The House has heard about savings, and it is estimated that about £280 million could be saved if we were to introduce a single waste authority and a single business services organisation. I am not 100% happy with having a single business services organisation, but I will come to that in a moment.

The issue of local government reform has created debates in the House and in councils across Northern Ireland. I am glad that, one way or the other, the Minister has laid it out on the table; we either step up to the mark or we remain with 26 councils. A lot has been said about reform. Who wants it? What will be achieved from it? How much will it cost? I have expressed my concerns in the past that reforming local government is not always the best idea, but I accept that there is a need for reform. I appreciate that that view may not be the collective or populist view, but nonetheless, for what it is worth, it is my view.

Much time has been spent discussing the five options that the Minister set out, especially option 5, which, as was clear from last week's NILGA annual conference, is his preferred option. He believes that option 5 will achieve efficiency savings of around £430 million. Many have disputed that figure, and no doubt many more will in the weeks and months to come, but, regardless of how we get to the end of the process, maximum efficiencies must be delivered, not just efficiencies for efficiencies' sake.

As I said, I do not fully support the establishment of a single business services organisation. I may be being parochial, but I believe that local businesses should gain something from the process. I ask the Minister to clarify whether councils can opt in or opt out.

In conclusion, many staff who are involved in the local government sector are looking to us to deliver local government reform. Many people across the country are looking to us to deliver the most efficient local government reform.

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

Mr I McCrea: If we cannot deliver that, it is time to stop wasting taxpayers' money and to move

forward with the 26 councils intact. That will ensure that we do not spend any more money.

Mr Kinahan: I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council. I am extremely pleased to be speaking in support of the motion, and, like my colleague, I, too, see it as a probing motion. There is too much concern, especially among councillors and council staff, over whether the reorganisation of councils will actually happen. While doubt exists, council work suffers, and Northern Ireland suffers with it. We need clarity from the Minister and from others on why they think that the delay exists, and we need to get on with debating the issues around reorganisation and correcting the mistakes that have been made thus far.

My colleague Mr Beggs focused on the DUP/Sinn Féin gerrymander, using changes to local government boundaries, and their favouring the model of 11 councils rather than 15, which fitted the electorate's identities much better. He was right to do so, but I want to go a bit further. I, like many, long to see government in Northern Ireland done by consensus and breaking away from sectarian lines. The DUP and Sinn Féin majorities that the electorate gave in 2005 have been used like a battering ram to ensure that sectarianism remains. The boundary changes proposed under the 11-council plan are another demonstration of that same attitude. History will mark those two parties down as the dinosaurs that held back progress in Northern Ireland. We have a dysfunctional Executive, which further proves the lack of progress that has been made.

My colleague also concentrated on the small savings of £1.2 million a year per new council that the change will bring. Where did the vision of my party colleague Sam Foster go? He had a vision of citizens receiving excellent services, with decisive work being done in councils, giving the public an exemplary, economic and efficient service. Sadly, that all seems to have gone by the wayside. So much looked promising. I suggest that we look at reforming how this institution operates first, and when we have that right, we should look at councils.

When Mr Foster proposed the reorganisation of councils, the Assembly did not exist in the form in which it does today. Consensus government existed. We did not have two parties excluding all the others.

Mr T Clarke: Pushover. *[Laughter.]*

Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I will.

Mr T Clarke: I apologise for speaking from a sedentary position, but I was talking about the days of pushover unionism.

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

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Clarke should look at the Hillsborough agreement.

When Sam Foster originally proposed reform of local government, two parties on the Executive were not excluding all the others. The DUP and Sinn Féin claim that the other parties are included, when everyone knows that that is not the case.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No; I will carry on for the moment.

Mr Weir: We had to go to court to get access to papers.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is not giving way.

4.45 pm

Mr Kinahan: I do not have the exact number, but, recently, they claimed to have made some 518 agreements, or a similar number, yet they hide beyond confidentiality when they are asked to reveal what the points were. A cynic would suggest that the inability to detail them intimates that, in many cases, they were on insignificant matters such as how much invisible ink to buy or how many erasers to purchase to correct all the mistakes. If the First Minister and deputy First Minister refuse to tell us, who will?

Too much effort has gone into the reorganisation of local government in a way that guarantees DUP and Sinn Féin sectarian domination to allow it to succeed for the public interest. Too many doubts now exist. Will transition committees be ready? Will the right finance and resources be forthcoming from central government? Will rates need to be raised to pay for it? Will NILGA still have a role as some councils watch its power building? Will councillors be able to be trained in time to take their part in the proposed new planning system? Is there enough time for all the legislation that is coming through?

A few weeks ago, in an answer to me, the Minister said that he had faith in all councillors to be trustworthy. The serious matters in connection with Castlereagh Borough Council proved my concern.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: Not at the moment, thank you.

The public now feel that we are all in it only for the money, which is grossly unfair. We still need to proceed with devolving planning, but we must be careful about how that is done. It is necessary, yet something has gone wrong. Is it all unravelling?

There was, and is, considerable potential in the shared services organisation, especially with a voluntary basis, and in a single waste authority. However, neither concept has been sold well, and ignorance has been allowed to create doubts to the extent of killing off such promising ideas. Will the Minister reiterate his statement of 20 October 2009 and say that he is absolutely committed to delivering local government reform successfully in May 2011, or does he really want it to collapse? Will he join me in concentrating on reforming this institution so that it returns to the Belfast Agreement and to a model that actually delivers? I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The issue of cost has arisen. I tabled Assembly questions that elicited the response that the cost to all Departments was more than £97 million in addition to the £118 million upfront costs that were required of local government.

The SDLP's position on the reform of local government and the review of public administration is that guaranteed power sharing and fair treatment of minorities must be the cornerstone. One hundred thousand voters who live in nationalist-controlled or neutral councils will be transferred to unionist-controlled councils. That might not really matter if there were no concerns or if we could all be assured that political minorities would be treated fairly and equally in all councils. We cannot be sure of that, as has been shown by events in Ballymena, Castlereagh, Magherafelt and Lisburn. Sinn Féin Members referred to aspects of the proposals on Dunmurry.

The unusual point is that the SDLP has been the first party to mention equality in the debate.

There has not been a squeak from Sinn Féin on that issue as it goes along with a plan to transfer major powers to councils without guaranteed safeguards on fair treatment. Of course, given the gerrymandering on the issue of policing and justice, where Sinn Féin and its colleagues in the DUP —

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Butler: The Member talked about equality and gerrymandering. Why does the SDLP on Lisburn City Council support Edwin Poots's view that Dunmurry should stay in that council area? Seemingly, those councillors are going against what the SDLP leadership says on the issue.

Mr McGlone: Perhaps the Member will correct me, but he also sits on that council. Will he confirm that it was the SDLP, not Provisional Sinn Féin, that referred the matter to the Equality Commission?

Nevertheless, I shall move on. Planning, for example, could be used to gerrymander electoral areas in the same way that housing once was. The SDLP wants cast-iron protection and guarantees that power sharing will be laid down in legislation before any powers are transferred. We want all new responsibilities —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I am sorry, Peter, I have to move on.

We want all new responsibilities financed properly, rather than dumped on local ratepayers. The SDLP seeks a legislative basis for inclusivity, power sharing and equality that can guarantee the following: cross-community representation in the top posts of chair and vice-chair of all councils; proportional representation for council nominations to all committee posts and outside bodies; sufficient cross-community consensus on important decisions; and sufficient and stringent safeguards against partisan or sectarian decision-making.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I am sorry, Peter, but I have a bit more that I want to say. I do not want to take any further interventions. We can have a chat about this on another occasion.

At the moment, there are delays, uncertainty about positions, employment and unemployment in respect of some in local government, and

confusion about the funding arrangements for councils. I have spoken to officials today who said that insecurity about positions and employment is feeding into insecurity about the decision-making process at local councils.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Sorry, Tommy. Well, OK. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gallagher: Does Mr McGlone agree that those insecurities are genuine and valid, and that concerns were heightened by the comments that the Minister made at a conference last week?

Mr McGlone: I am aware of those concerns, and I am sure that those will be reflected in discussions with the Minister this week.

I made reference earlier to the need for safeguards to underpin equality, particularly in the role of planning. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I was involved in the scrutiny of delivering a fit-for-purpose Planning Service. A number of issues arose during that process, including the requirement for the Planning Service to ensure that its functions are fit for purpose, to clear its backlog of cases, to deal with procedures and priorities in the current economic climate, and to ensure that its planning policy statements are met. Another issue that arose was the need for business to be transferred to councils. There was also the bedlam of the ePIC project. I am sure that those of us who sit and have sat on local councils agree that the local government auditor would have visited the council concerned pronto had that type of behaviour been going on. Even worse, we learned that £63,650 was paid out in bonuses for achieving efficiencies.

Given that our party was founded on the key aspects of civil rights, with equality at our core, we cannot go back to the past. We want to see efficiency, progress, job security for those 9,000 employees, good governance, on-time elections, and new and fair boundaries. We want all that to be underpinned by the core qualities of transparency, openness, equality, and inclusivity for all. If we learn only one lesson from the past, it should be to enshrine those key principles.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I can state clearly that I do not have a conflict of interest, because I have not been a councillor since September 2009. I am glad that I can, therefore, speak with a clear conscience on this issue.

There must be clarity and leadership on this important issue, which relates to the review of public administration. I point out that ratepayers are being forgotten in this process, even though they are core to the conversation that we need to have. Once we forget about ratepayers, we may as well go home, because they are the people who sustain councils and elect politicians to places such as this to make decisions for them. That is why we support and commend the motion.

Mr McCrea said that Sinn Féin was holding up some decisions in the Executive because it did not agree with them. He then spoke about two or three decisions that he did not agree with. Therefore, it works both ways. The important point —

Mr I McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: No thanks, Ian.

The important point is that consensus needs to be built around the issues. If we do not do so, they are doomed to failure. It is very important that we work collectively to ensure that uncertainty, one of the words used in the motion, is addressed, because there is confusion in the community sector and in the councils. I meet community representatives on a weekly basis, and they all say that they are not sure what the future holds. For example, we talk about neighbourhood renewal, but will responsibility for that belong to the Department for Social Development or to the councils?

Patsy mentioned the planning issues with regard to the Public Accounts Committee, and, therefore, I will not rehearse those arguments. However, it is very important that Departments step up to the mark and make sure that everything that they are handing over to local councils is fit for purpose before it is handed over. If that does not happen, councils will be put on the back foot and will be left unsustainable in the future. The smoother the transition the better, as it is a very important baton that is being handed from Departments to councils. We have been looking at the issue since March 2008, and it has to be implemented by May 2011.

I will take up one issue with Patsy. He said that the SDLP was the first party to talk about equality and that Sinn Féin has not mentioned it today. For confirmation, Patsy: equality is at the core of what Sinn Féin does. Every decision that we

make is based on equality. We could look at how the SDLP has performed in councils over the years, when it blocked members of Sinn Féin, despite it being the largest party in Belfast City Council, from being elected to mayoral and chairperson positions. When we talk about equality, we talk about equality. If the Member wants that conversation, perhaps we can have it later.

My colleague Paul Butler touched on the issue of gerrymandering, which is what is perceived when it comes to some of the boundaries, especially Dunmurry. The days of gerrymandering are over, and I urge the Minister to take that on board when making decisions. No longer will anyone accept gerrymandering. Those days are gone forever, and that is a very important point. Ministers in the Executive and beyond need to ensure that those days are gone. Nobody will accept those days coming back.

In common with other Members, the Minister is a councillor in Lisburn City Council, so there is a clear conflict of interests. Perhaps the Minister should have resigned his council seat before making any of these decisions, because it is unfair that he is taking through RPA as DOE Minister and as councillor on one of the councils involved. There is an unfair advantage, in that the Minister could possibly push an advantage for Lisburn City Council. Those are issues that need to be addressed, and there are some serious questions that the Minister needs to answer.

Value for money is very important.

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

Mr P Maskey: Value for money is very important, and £118 million in cost will create £428 million in savings over 25 years.

Mr Bell: I support the motion, no matter how badly it was proposed or how factually inaccurate it may be. I declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council and as a member of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. Like Oscar Wilde, I have nothing to declare but my genius. Having listened to Mr Beggs, it seems that he has nothing to declare including his genius. I do not know which party is speaking, whether it is the Ulster Conservative and Unionist New Force voice of Beggs, or the Ulster Conservative and Labour force voice of Sylvia Hermon. However,

we can support the motion, even though it has been made difficult for us.

Most certainly, this must be about efficiency and about putting more money into ratepayers' wallets and purses. The Minister is absolutely correct to seek efficiencies. Throughout my Strangford constituency, and in relation to big businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises or householders, it ill behoves any Minister not to seek efficiencies and not to keep money in pockets at a time of economic recession.

5.00 pm

The financial incompetence of the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists — New Force, which is seeking savage cuts across the board, will not deliver the efficiencies that are being sought. It would be better coming behind the Minister with some real proposals. Under Sam Foster, the Ulster Unionists had a decade to advance the original proposal. For that party to talk about delays by others is astounding hypocrisy. The Ulster Unionists have —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: I will if I get an extra minute to speak. How could I refuse to give way to you?

Mrs D Kelly: I am glad that the Member gave way. I recall him saying that he was once a member of the Conservative Party at Queen's University. He is also a former member of the Ulster Unionist Party, so when did he do a U-turn?

Mr Bell: It was long after Mr Foster brought the proposal to us. Do I get an extra minute in which to speak?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, you do.

Mr Bell: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I appreciate that.

Let me deal with another contradiction in what Mr Beggs has proposed. Is it not the case that, on 3 November 2009, Mr Empey said that he was fundamentally opposed to local government reform? There again we have the forked tongue of UCUNF, with Empey telling us that he is fundamentally opposed to local government reform and Beggs telling us that he wants it to happen faster. One of those two has been caught, metaphorically, with his pants down. We support the proposal to create greater efficiencies.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: I have only five minutes. You will have your chance to sum up. When doing so, I would appreciate it if you could tell us whether you are with Mr Empey and are fundamentally opposed to local government reform, as he was on 3 November 2009, or whether you are with UCUNF and want the reform to go faster? It does not make sense.

Mr Kinahan tried to lecture the House on consensus government. Does Mr Kinahan not recall that Peter Robinson had to go to court to secure access to the Executive business papers and that he beat the Ulster Unionists in court? Is that what Mr Kinahan calls a model of good government and a model of consensus government?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member to make all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Bell: Through the Chair, was it not Peter Robinson who went to court and sought access to the Executive papers that the Ulster Unionists had tried to delay? Then the Ulster Unionists lecture us on consensus government. That terminological inexactitude that Mr Kinahan brought forward can be nailed.

We need to seek proper efficiencies. The party politics of Sinn Féin has been brought in to the debate, but is it not the case that the deputy First Minister has had the reorganisation Bill since June 2009? Is it not the case, therefore, that Sinn Féin is making prevarication and delay on the matter something of an art form?

We want to see efficiencies, better local government with more money in the hands of the ratepayers and a genuine economic way forward that delivers for the ratepayer. We will support the motion, no matter how badly it was proposed.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I thank Members who contributed to the debate for doing so. I understand Members' concerns about ongoing uncertainty and delay in the local government reform programme. I welcome the debate not only to hear Members' views but to reaffirm my commitment to successfully delivering local government reform. I firmly believe in strong and effective local government, and, like many Members, I want to see that realised through the reform process. I have been engaged in local government for many years and can confirm that that is still the case.

Significant progress has been made in working towards local government reform, and I am advancing a number of pieces of legislation. The first piece of legislation, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which has progressed through the Assembly since its introduction in June 2009, is scheduled to have its Final Stage tomorrow. Consultation on the draft local government finance Bill, which will modernise the financial framework within local government, finished on 31 October 2009, and it is due to come before the Assembly probably within the next month.

Policy proposals for local government reorganisation have been with the Executive since June 2009. The proposals have been cleared by the First Minister, and, after they have been approved by the deputy First Minister and the Executive, I intend to publish them for consultation as soon as possible thereafter. However, in delivering local government reform, we must ensure that benefits will be gained. Therefore, I have requested that local government, through NILGA, puts forward its proposals on how the local government sector intends to achieve the regional collaboration to realise the expected benefits. Although the proposed efficiencies will be discussed at the next meeting of the strategic leadership board on 25 February 2010, I have urged local government to make the right choices now to enable the changes in efficiency and delivery that the public and I expect from the programme. I will not continue the debate beyond that point.

The time for prevarication on the issue is over. I will listen carefully to any proposals and decide on the way forward. However, I say this openly and honestly: it will be very difficult to convince me that there is a credible and deliverable alternative to option 5. Savings must be demonstrated, and I will not proceed with any proposal that does not reduce the cost to the ratepayer. There is no point going through the pain of amalgamating councils if we cannot achieve a substantially better outcome at the conclusion of the process.

Under preferred option 5, the reform programme will begin to realise a reduction in operating costs for local government by 2013-14, with the break-even point for return on the initial investment by 2016-17. That makes economic sense and represents long-term value for citizens, ratepayers and taxpayers. I have

also had initial discussions with the Finance Minister to explore the implementation and longer-term funding options. Although I feel that a reasonable case can be made that funding for reforms should come from both central and local government, we should not underestimate how difficult the negotiation will be, particularly in light of the potential savings that could accrue to local government on implementation of the PWC report.

I have asked local government members of the SLB to consider that in consultation with the sector and to provide their views and a realistic assessment of what proportion of the costs that are set out in the PWC report could be funded by local government. At NILGA's annual conference last week, I took the opportunity to warn local government to be realistic in its deliberations on funding for the reform programme. I look forward to receiving constructive comments from the sector at the next SLB meeting to help me to put detailed proposals to the Executive as early as possible. However, I am especially conscious of the ongoing financial difficulties that central government and the Executive face, and I am in no doubt that the Finance Minister will expect a compelling case from local government. In any event, Members will expect that. We hear all the time about the challenges that face the health and education sectors and our whole infrastructure. All those issues are key government priorities. Therefore, given that local government will ultimately be the beneficiary, it is not the strongest argument to ask the Finance Minister for a considerable amount of money to develop local government reform. Nonetheless, this is a central government process, and central government should engage with it.

I will respond to Members' comments. Mr Beggs claimed that Michael McGimpsey was the only Minister who had been successful in bringing forward any measures on the reform agenda. Mr Beggs is, of course, wrong. However, that is not unusual. When I was Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, we delivered the single library authority without much difficulty and set a template for others to follow. Mr Beggs has conveniently forgotten about that. Although he remembers the 154 days of delay in 2008 that resulted from Sinn Féin throwing its toys out of the pram because it did not get its own way, he seems to forget that, when the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP were the leading parties, this place was suspended three times. That lasted

for years, not days. Perhaps Mr Beggs could remind us of the good old days of the Ulster Unionist Party, when we had a lot of huffing and puffing and a whole lot of suspensions packed into the middle of the process.

The projected savings that Mr Beggs referred to are also projected costs. PricewaterhouseCoopers was asked to identify the maximum amount of the costs and the minimum amount that the savings would produce. Having looked at that, we are confident that the costs should come in at considerably less than £118 million and that the savings can be considerably more than £438 million.

I do not get what some Members are saying today. Paul Maskey said that the ratepayers are being forgotten. The ratepayers are being forgotten by the Members in this Chamber who do not want to make difficult decisions or implement real savings opportunities that can be passed on to the ratepayers in the form of better services or lower rates. Members are engaging in the nonsense of protectionism and are not prepared to make difficult decisions.

Let me say this for absolute clarity: I will not engage in any process that does not deliver real efficiencies and real savings that can be passed on to the real people — the ratepayers. I hear the drivel from Members who say that they are not prepared to adopt option 5 and that we could do things in a different way. I say to them, "Show us what that way is". I asked NILGA, not last week but in December 2009, to produce an answer by next week. I have not given them just a week. We have had the PricewaterhouseCoopers report since October 2009. We considered that report in December 2009, and we are coming back to it this week. That report will either have to go through as it is proposed, or local government will have to produce an option that can save in excess of £438 million.

How could I go to the public and say that, under option 4, we could spend £118 million of its money up front in order to save £156 million over 25 years? I would have no credibility in the country if I did that, nor would this House, and people would rightly be referring to the jokes on the hill. I make it absolutely clear to the House that I will not do that. Any alternative proposal will have to be effective and will have to deliver real savings; it cannot be some cock and bull story from Members who have not thought

things through properly. Mr Beggs should have understood that, because he was at the most recent SLB meeting. He is due to attend the next SLB meeting, so it is difficult to understand why he has such a lack of knowledge of some of those issues.

The chairman of the Committee, Mrs Kelly, raised financial issues. The £118 million that was to be spent up front should not cost ratepayers, because we were not proposing to take anything back from the loan that had been made to local government until the savings kicked in. Ultimately, there should be long-term savings, but there should be no short-term additional burden placed on ratepayers.

Some Members here, however, do not mind placing additional burdens on ratepayers. Indeed, when Mr Farry was Mayor of North Down, the rates in that council area went up by 8.16%. I am glad to see that, now he is not the mayor, the rates only went up by 3% in the past year. Mr Beggs was quite happy to put through rates rises of 7%, 7.98% and 5.65% in the past three years. It is clear that some Members do not have any particular issue about the ratepayers and are happy to charge plenty of rates and to raise the rates by three and four times the rate of inflation.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for giving way. I am interested that the Minister used the example of when my colleague was Mayor of North Down. Is he now suggesting that, on top of the current reform programme, he is going to add executive mayors?

5.15 pm

The Minister of the Environment: That was not part of the consultation process at any time. We conduct consultation processes to elucidate what the public want. The Member, therefore, made an irrelevant point. Nonetheless, he is entitled to be irrelevant should he so wish.

Mr Farry, in referring to boundaries, said that the Boundaries Commissioner was entitled to make a mess in the interests of the democratic process. I do not wear that load of liberal hogwash, which even conflicts with the views of his colleague Mr Lunn. He was part of a delegation, which included the SDLP, that pleaded with me on the basis that the Boundaries Commissioner had stepped away from the proposals that had been put to him.

Dr Farry: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of the Environment: I will finish my point before giving way.

The delegation made the case that the Boundaries Commissioner had neither followed the strongest identifiable boundaries nor taken into account the issue of the “major part” to which the Bill refers.

Dr Farry: Will the Minister give the House an example, from the past 100 years, of a Minister anywhere else in these islands who sought to meddle with the recommendations of a Boundaries Commissioner whose position had been independently established by Parliament?

The Minister of the Environment: Mr Lunn is quite happy for there to be meddling, as he described it. The Boundaries Commissioner did not follow the guidance that was given to him on incorporating the “whole or the major part” of former districts in the 11 new local government districts. We must all deal with the difficulty that that has created.

Boundaries are not the real problem. The difficulty in delivering the process will come from people such as Mr Butler. He said, as did Mr Boylan, that the BSO and the single waste authority were not deliverable. They said that they would not wear it. They are, therefore, saying that they will not wear £280 million of savings to the public. When compared with option 4, the selection of option 5, which delivers the single waste authority and the BSO, creates an additional £280 million of savings. I will not wear not making those savings.

We heard that option 5 could damage local services, but what is gained by having 26 procurement bodies across Northern Ireland? Does anybody think that a single council has more procurement power than an amalgamation of 26 councils? We need only look at the power that Tesco and Sainsbury's have in the private sector through buying on such a large scale. The greater the collective buying power that we can put together, the better the deal that we will get for ratepayers. What does it matter whether legal or corporate services are delivered in a single centre? People want front line services to be guaranteed, and we can deliver better front line services by implementing the changes to which I referred.

Mr Kinahan referred to a dysfunctional Executive. A better reference would have been to the dysfunctional Executive that existed under his party and David Trimble. He also referred to Sam Foster's vision of greater efficiency. I want to drive through greater efficiency, but others want to stop it.

Perhaps Mr McGlone raised the real issue when he suggested that 100,000 voters would transfer to unionist areas. Is that the real reason that Sinn Féin is trying to block the process?

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

The Minister of the Environment: The real reason for Sinn Féin trying to block a process that could create genuine savings for ratepayers could be that it is scared of the outcome but is afraid to go back to the public on that issue.

Mr Beggs: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. Some light has been shed on the matter by Members' comments but not as much as I would have liked.

The motion addresses the First Minister and deputy First Minister, because we want to uncover where exactly in the process is the reform of local government. The Minister of the Environment said that he tabled a motion on boundaries some time ago and that the issue is in the hands of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We want to know what the problem is with the process. There is little point in the Minister of the Environment coming to the Assembly without an explanation, but he cannot provide one, because the matter is, unfortunately, with the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Dolores Kelly highlighted a recent letter from the Secretary of State, which indicated that boundaries must be finalised by January otherwise the 2011 elections would be in question under any new proposal. I understand that that is just a legislative time issue and that the Boundaries Commissioner needs time to complete his work. Given the relevance of such a practical issue, we must be at a critical stage. However, even after the Minister's comments, I do not know any more about how we will progress. That is an indictment of the process to date.

Peter Weir highlighted the fact that delays are the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However,

he failed to explain or, indeed, apologise for the contribution that was made in setting the guidance and directions for the Boundaries Commissioner. As Stephen Farry said, once directions have been set, it is difficult for politics to meddle in them. I do not know how we will get out of this mess, and the Minister did not explain how the process will go forward.

Cathal Boylan indicated that he was against a new business service organisation and a single waste authority. However, he did not explain why he is against a move towards a single waste authority, which could create savings. There may be arguments about the precise administrative methods that should be used to ensure that people are given guarantees and that an appropriate model is created. However, Members who just say that they are against the proposal for a single waste authority are essentially telling ratepayers that they are against the potential savings that could be brought about as a result of the efficiency of operation and the conducting of business with outside bodies through tendering processes and so on. It is unfortunate that opposition has been stated without any explanation having been given. Similarly, it is unfortunate that Members indicated that they were against the business service organisation without making any constructive comment.

Another interesting issue was raised that complicates the boundary recommendations even further. The Minister of the Environment is a councillor for the borough in which there is a dispute regarding the boundary. In any normal democratic process, there would be a need to avoid what, if not an actual conflict of interest, is certainly a potential conflict of interest. I do not know how the Minister can involve himself directly in those issues given his role as a councillor. For example, there are issues about rates funding potentially going to one council or the other from sizeable commercial operations.

Stephen Farry said that the Boundary Commission should be a neutral body and that politics should not be involved. I do not know how the mistakes that have been made can be righted, but I look forward to hearing the Minister's intentions in that regard.

Alastair Ross complained about my raising of past failings regarding boundary legislation. However, he did not acknowledge his involvement in supporting the guidance and

regulations. Failings have occurred because the Boundaries Commissioner was not given flexibility to recognise local identity. The Dunmurry situation could have been dealt with more readily if such flexibility had been given.

Paul Butler said that the Minister made a presentation to NILGA recently, and he outlined his concern at the ultimatum. He asked why the legislation was being held up and, indeed, whether the delay had anything to do with boundaries. Both issues, namely the boundaries and the finances, need to be resolved. The process could hit a stumbling block because of either of those issues, and it is unfortunate that I have not heard how we will move forward on them.

Ian McCrea asked whether a number of Bills were being held up in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with one side blocking the other. That is certainly not a model for good government. Both the major parties seem to be taking little regard of the wider political viewpoint, and both may well be following their carve-up and looking after their own, rather than looking after the wider population of Northern Ireland and the public interest.

My colleague Danny Kinahan sought clarification of the reasons for the delays and expressed his wish for consensus politics in Northern Ireland rather than the carve-up under which we seem to be operating, with both major parties treating their individual silos as their fiefdoms and taking little regard of the views of others. Patsy McGlone spoke of the cost of the RPA to date, some £97 million and a further £118 million, as we know, and the importance of protecting minorities in the future process. We would all agree with that and accept it, because every council area in Northern Ireland has minorities, and it is important, particularly at local government level, that there are good relations and respect is given to all sections.

Paul Maskey reiterated the view that the single waste authority would not be acceptable. What he did not say was from where the savings will come and why specifically he is against the single waste authority. Will he say to the ratepayers throughout Northern Ireland that there will be additional costs as a result of not looking to more efficient bases?

Mr P Maskey: Just to clarify, I think that if the Member checks Hansard tomorrow he will find that I never once mentioned the single waste authority.

Mr Beggs: I must have taken that note about someone else. I will check, and I apologise if I have wrongly blamed the Member. However, I think that he did mention the Minister's conflict of interest, which is a real issue. How can the Minister be the final arbiter in finalising a boundary while representing a council in that area, without having some personal input? There is a clear conflict of interest that needs to be addressed. That would not be accepted in any other part of the United Kingdom, and it is time that it was addressed.

Jonathan Bell went on to — what did Jonathan do? He criticised me and poor Sam Foster, who is long retired, blaming him for a decade of lack of decision even though he was a Minister for a very brief period. I appreciate that Mr Bell is a relatively new Assembly Member, but do understand that, when you are not an Assembly Member and not a Minister, you cannot make decisions.

Turning quickly to the Minister's comments — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Beggs: The Minister seemed to say that he continues to favour option 5 and sees advantages in that for the ratepayers. However, there are aspects of that option that need to be resolved. There is the potential for efficiencies with shared services, but, as I have said time and again, we must ensure that we do not create another statutory body like Land and Property Services that can put the bill into everyone but does not deliver. There must be clear results and a competition to ensure that an efficient service is delivered. We do not want to create another bureaucratic body that will cost the ratepayers and not deliver services. That is essential.

I did not mention the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, but I did at the start mention that there were three major areas of the Budget: local government, health and education. DCAL is not quite up there. It is an important area that has gone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Beggs: I am coming to the end of my time. I hope that the RPA process, which was started by my colleague Sam Foster, will be allowed to continue and will be finalised in the vision that

he set out, which was to bring benefits to all members of our community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the ongoing uncertainty and delay in the local government reform programme; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to advise when the relevant legislation will be put to the Executive and the Assembly for approval.

5.30 pm

Police: 50:50 Recruitment Policy

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

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly notes the renewal for one final year of "50:50" recruitment to the police in Northern Ireland; looks forward to the next substantial recruitment competition when, for the first time in a decade, Protestant applicants will face no barriers on the grounds of perceived religious affiliation in the process of being considered for a career in the police. — [Mr Campbell.]

Mr Campbell: Mr Deputy Speaker, given the lateness of the hour and the considerable number of Members who gave notice of their intention to speak, I do not intend to move the motion today. I hope that the Business Committee will reschedule the motion at a suitable time in the very near future, taking into account the number of Members who expressed an interest in contributing to the debate.

Motion not moved.

Adjourned at 5.31 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matters of the Day

Newry Courthouse Car Bomb

Mr Speaker: Mr Danny Kennedy has sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I shall call Mr Kennedy 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 Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise a Matter of the Day, and I am sure that the House will join me in condemning the very sinister and highly dangerous bomb attack that took place yesterday evening at Newry Courthouse. As a local representative and on behalf of my party, the Ulster Unionist Party, I condemn unreservedly the attack, which has caused further fear and anxiety in my constituency and, indeed, much further afield. I also want to take the opportunity to express my thanks and admiration to the PSNI personnel and security officers who acted so quickly and effectively last night to prevent widespread injury and death. I also commend the members of the public who alerted the PSNI to the fact that a suspicious car had been left at the courthouse.

In the current political climate, republican dissidents clearly designed the attack to maximise fear and uncertainty and to destabilise the entirety of our political structures. We must not allow that to happen, and I trust that the political reaction to the event will be a united response of condemnation and a clear indication that parties that have been elected to the House will work

together on an all-inclusive basis to ensure that political stability is maintained.

If there is to be an appropriate political reaction, in my view and in my party's view there must also be an effective security response. My party and I have been concerned for some time that the threats posed by republican dissidents have been viewed with a certain amount of complacency by the Chief Constable and his senior command and by senior political figures, including the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in the mistaken belief that those individuals were unrepresentative and lacked the manpower to cause serious problems. Clearly, that is not the case, and we now face a deteriorating security situation, particularly in border constituencies, such as mine in Newry and Armagh. Therefore, in my view, an immediate security response is required. It must include additional resources in the border area and increased use of intelligence to combat the threat posed by the so-called dissidents.

The people of Newry, people throughout my constituency and people all over Northern Ireland will rightly condemn the attack. This coming Sunday, 28 February, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the mortar attack on the Newry RUC base at Corry Square, which resulted in the deaths of nine officers. Few of us could have imagined that, 25 years later, we would still have the challenges from those republicans who are not prepared to walk the paths of peace.

Lord Morrow: First, I apologise for the non-attendance of my party colleague Mr Irwin, who is in Newry as we speak. It is not the first time that we have had to come to the House and condemn this sort of atrocity. However, it seems that there are people in the outside world who are absolutely steadfast in endeavouring to take Northern Ireland back to the bad old days.

On behalf of my party, I utterly condemn what happened in Newry yesterday evening. My party and I give our unqualified support to the security forces as they seek to dig out those who carried out the awful atrocity. Let it be said that we as an Assembly owe our total and unconditional support to the security forces. It is one thing to condemn something; it is quite another thing to openly support the security forces in taking whatever measures they feel are necessary to ensure that such atrocities do not happen again.

We are told and we had hoped that we were moving into a new era, that things were going to be different, that changes were going to happen and that the bomb and the bullet would not be used as they had been over the past 40 years to bring about political change. However, the incident in Newry last night is a very cold and stark reminder that there are those who wish to continue on the old paths. The bomb and the bullet is the only answer that they have to give to the community.

Let it be said that we as a party, as an Assembly and as a community owe this to the people of Northern Ireland: I have heard understandable condemnation of what happened in Newry, but it is one thing to condemn it; it is quite another thing to give unqualified support to the security forces, and that is what is needed at this time.

We also believe that the security forces are under-resourced. That must change, so that they can respond to the type of incident that happened in Newry. I hope that, around the House today, there will be no ifs, ands and buts in our support for the security forces and in our condemnation of those who carried out the atrocity in Newry.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As someone who was born and reared in Newry and continues to live in Newry, I am absolutely appalled by what happened last night. In fact, I live just up the road from the courthouse, and the explosion seemed much nearer than it was. I utterly condemn the people who did this. They have no place in our society. I join Lord Morrow and Danny Kennedy in condemning the action unreservedly. To echo Lord Morrow, there are no ifs, ands or buts.

The people who carried out the attack have no mandate. The people of Newry have continually turned them down, and they will continue to do so. Historically, Newry has suffered unemployment and various other ailments. It

is now on the road to recovery and has been for the past 15 or 16 years. Many people have done a great deal of hard work to maintain that recovery, and they will continue to do that work.

My colleague Conor Murphy is in the constituency at present. I apologise for his absence from the Chamber. Interestingly enough, last night, he and I were at an event at Corrinshogo Gaelic Football Club on the outskirts of Newry at which the club set out its vision for the future of a new sporting complex and community facilities. Based in an area that encompasses two of the most deprived wards in the Six Counties, the club spoke of the legacy that it wants to leave young people.

Unfortunately, the people who perpetrated the attack leave no legacy. They have no place in our society. I condemn them unreservedly, and Newry's people will continue to do so.

Ms Ritchie: I want to add my condemnation and that of my party, the SDLP, to the comments that other parties have made. I also offer on my party's behalf my apologies for my colleague Dominic Bradley's absence. He is in Newry, standing solidly with his constituents in the city.

I spent most of last Friday in Newry with Dominic. We met many people and admired the progress that has been made and continues to be made in the city, right across the social and economic spectrum. In my role as Minister for Social Development, I am preparing a master plan for Newry city centre and a major public realm environmental improvement scheme, which is also for the city's central area.

It sickens me that, when so many people are working in partnership and looking forward to a better future in Newry, a tiny minority should seek to take society backwards with its violence. The SDLP has condemned resolutely the violence that Newry has experienced for more than 30 years. My party has equal contempt for the recent wave of violent mayhem in Newry and Keady. I thank God that no one was killed or injured in last night's outrage. The bomb was within yards of a recently completed social housing scheme in Canal Street. It is remarkable that the community came through the violent bomb attack unscathed.

The SDLP did not stand up to violent thugs for a generation only to ease up now in a time of relative calm. As I have said on many occasions already, anyone who knows anything about last

night's crime or the one that took place in Keady on Friday should go to the police immediately to help put those criminals behind bars. Throughout the years, the SDLP has always stood up against violence, from wherever it has come, be it in Newry and Armagh or South Down, and particularly in the Newry and Mourne District Council area.

Mr Ford: On behalf of my party colleagues, I condemn without any reservation whatsoever the act of violence that took place against the people of Newry and their courthouse last night. My party offers its sympathy to Newry's people — residents, businesspeople and Court Service staff — whose lives will be disrupted today and, in many cases, for some time to come as a result of the damage that has been done. My party expresses its support for the Police Service in the work that it carried out last night and the follow-up work that it must do in the aftermath of the atrocity.

There is absolutely no doubt that nothing but the grace of God prevented loss of life. It was a cowardly and murderous attack, which, thankfully, did not result in anything more than damage to property. That damage will, however, take its toll.

I have no expectation that words of condemnation from me or anybody else in the Chamber will make any difference to the people who carried out the attack. However, if we politicians stand together in this place, ensure that politics works and start to deliver a better future for Northern Ireland's people, we will have an effect on those who, so far, have been inclined to turn a blind eye or not ask their children what they are up to. It is vitally important that we continue that process of working together, so that we can show the better way that we know exists and do not see those who wish to drag us back 20 or 30 years succeeding in their evil aims.

10.45 am

I sympathise with the people of Newry and express my support for those in authority who are seeking to deal with the perpetrators and to catch them and put them behind bars. I trust that we, as politicians, will stand united and continue to stand united in doing so.

Ms Purvis: As others in the Chamber have done, the Progressive Unionist Party condemns the bomb attack in Newry last night. The people who carried out that attack have absolutely

nothing to offer to the people of Northern Ireland or to the future of Northern Ireland. The elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland sit in the Chamber, but those criminals are not represented here. The elected representatives of the people of the Republic of Ireland sit in the Dáil, but those people are not represented there. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure that those people are sidelined, caught and brought to justice. Their warped cause offers nothing to anyone in this society.

I have been talking to people in the past couple of days. They have not been talking about the constitutional position of Northern Ireland; they have been talking about jobs, job losses, housing and benefits. That is what people are concerned about. They are concerned about their quality of life and improvements to their quality of life. It is incumbent on all Members to make politics work, as I know they want to, to ensure that we do not go back to the days of the past; to ensure that there are no more victims of violence; and to ensure that we start to deliver to improve the quality of life of people in Northern Ireland. That is what we need to work on, and I am sure that everyone will join me in supporting that work.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety Sectoral Format

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to make a statement on the ninth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the health and food safety sectoral format, which took place in the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' office on Wednesday, 25th November 2009. The Executive were represented by myself, as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and Michelle Gildernew MP, MLA, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The statement has been endorsed by Minister Gildernew. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Harney TD, Minister for Health and Children. I chaired the meeting, in which we received a report on progress on various items in the health sector. Those items included the launch of revised media guidelines on suicide prevention and the agreement by O2 to the removal of border area roaming charges for calls to the Northern Ireland 24/7 crisis response helpline. That was in response to a specific approach, and follow-up work with other providers, including those based in the Republic of Ireland, will continue.

The meeting also noted 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 provision of paediatric congenital cardiac services. That service will provide much-needed support and will enable children to have their surgery closer to home.

With respect to the provision of radiotherapy services in the north-west, the Council noted the establishment of a cross-border collaboration subgroup to advise on care pathways for the new facility that is planned for Altnagelvin, taking account of capacity for patients from County Donegal.

Ministers also reviewed the current situation on swine flu planning and preparedness. We welcomed the continuing co-operation and sharing of information between officials and Ministers in both jurisdictions and noted the

structures that are in place for co-ordination on issues of mutual concern. Those structures have served well to date.

The Council was updated on the work of the cross-border child protection group and its various subgroups. We noted and welcomed the exchange of information on internet safety and social networking sites and co-operation on child protection research and knowledge transfer. We also reviewed progress towards establishing a joint protocol covering children in care and those on the child protection register who go missing, and children moving across the border where there are concerns. We noted the ongoing work on the development of a joint draft communication strategy and leaflets. The leaflets contain advice and guidance on what to do when worried about a child and on safer recruitment procedures for employers. We also received updates on developments on the vetting and barring scheme in Northern Ireland and noted that work is under way to place existing vetting arrangements in Ireland on a statutory basis.

The Council reviewed the continuing co-operation on cancer research. We noted and welcomed the extension into Northern Ireland of a Trinity College Dublin project on the human papilloma virus (HPV) and the setting up of an all-island gene library.

The meeting welcomed ongoing clinical trials and research at local, cross-border and international levels, and we noted progress in planning for the establishment of a biobank for medical research in both jurisdictions. However, we also recognised the challenge of advancing those plans in the current economic climate.

Ministers discussed the findings of the report 'Cancer Incidence, Mortality, Treatment and Survival in the North and South of Ireland: 1994-2004' and welcomed the success of two recent conferences. One was on health economics, and the other was a joint conference on cancer registries epidemiology.

I turn now to the food safety sector. The Council noted SafeFood's promotional activities, including a campaign, in collaboration with the Irish Heart Foundation and the Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke Association, to raise awareness on reducing dietary salt. We welcomed the planned launch of the community food initiatives, which subsequently took place in Belfast on 27 January 2010.

The Council was updated on Safefood's proposals for the development of an enteric reference service, involving specialised laboratory services for pathogenic enteric bacteria, for the island of Ireland. We agreed to defer further work on that proposal.

We expressed our thanks to the outgoing members of Safefood's scientific advisory committee (SAC) for their work. We also noted Safefood's proposal for a revised structure for the incoming SAC and that nominations for the new SAC will be brought forward for consideration at a future NSMC meeting.

We noted the current position on Safefood's business plans for 2009 and 2010 and that Safefood's 2008 annual accounts had been submitted to the Comptroller and Auditor General in both jurisdictions. I can also now report that the 2009 business plan was finalised at the 16 December meeting of the NSMC in the tourism sectoral format.

Mr Easton: I welcome the Minister's statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on health issues. Much good work seems to have been done in research, by Safefood and on child protection, cancer research, suicide prevention and, in particular, swine flu.

The Minister mentioned roaming charges for the suicide helpline. Is the NSMC trying to persuade other mobile phone companies to provide free calls to the helpline? Will the Minister clarify whether the Republic of Ireland is also seeing a reduction in the number of cases of swine flu?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I was extremely pleased to receive O2's support and co-operation. The fact that O2 will not apply roaming charges to calls to the helpline from border areas means that they will be free of charge. We have taken that matter up with O2's competitors and will seek to gain their support as well. I commend and formally thank O2 for its support in that vital area.

The incidence of swine flu has significantly reduced. The use of antivirals for the first phase was followed by vaccination, and we are now at the point at which we believe that we have moved through the containment phase into the treatment phase. The ability to vaccinate the population so quickly had a marked effect. We follow the national plan for swine flu, and the circulation of the swine flu vaccine in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK has had a virtuous

circle effect. The Irish Republic's plan mirrors what has been done in the UK, and it reports a similar reduction.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and the ongoing work that is taking place on an all-island basis.

I have two questions for the Minister. First, the meeting took place on 25 November 2009: why has it taken three months to report to the House? Perhaps there was a procedural reason. My second question relates to the work on suicide prevention. We are aware that young males are three to four times more likely to die by suicide, and I note that there is ongoing work on an all-Ireland basis. However, the proposal to develop an all-island men's mental health forum was not mentioned in the Minister's statement. Has the Minister an update on that?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no update on the all-island men's mental health forum. However, I will write to the Member.

We picked the first date that was available to report to the House, bearing in mind that we have had holidays in between.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. Like other Members, I welcome O2's removal of roaming charges. I urge the Minister to be as proactive as possible in getting other networks to follow the excellent example set by O2.

Is the Minister confident that child protection arrangements in the Republic of Ireland are as robust as they are in Northern Ireland? Will he continue to do his best to ensure that the Republic's standards on child protection are brought up to the same level so that we can share knowledge and protect children properly, as we have a fluid border?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We must remember that the Irish Republic has a separate regime for child protection from those of us in the UK. We have taken steps, beginning with the Hughes review into the abuse at Kincora boys' home in the 1980s, the protection of children and vulnerable adults (POCVA) checks, and the safeguarding arrangements that have just come into place. We are also working closely with other countries

in the UK through shared data. That is how we have moved forward with child protection in the UK.

The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 is our legislative basis, along with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, and a vetting and barring arrangement managed by AccessNI. Those are recent arrangements that came about as a result of the review into the Soham tragedy.

The Irish Republic operates its own system of child protection, but we are working with it on areas such as Internet safety, the movement of children, vetting and barring, media awareness and so on. I have written to my counterparts in the Republic on a couple of occasions, expressing my views and enquiring about child protection in the Irish Republic, as it operates a separate system. The Irish Republic cannot vet and bar individuals, as, under its constitution, all citizens have a right to a good name. Therefore, there are constitutional obstacles to the Dublin Government's moving to mirror practice in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, as they did with swine flu. We are well aware that there is a problem, and we are working with counterparts in the Republic. As Mr McCallister said, the border is fluid; abusers, along with vulnerable children and adults, can cross it not just between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland but between other parts of the UK. It is a live issue on which we have regular discussions.

Mr McDevitt: Although I welcome the Minister's statement, it appears to be a story of some work done and much more to do.

11.00 pm

Will the Minister inform the House whether specific conversations have taken place North and South on the aftermath of the Ryan report and on the amazing journey that the Republic of Ireland has had to travel in the past 10 years to accept responsibility for the wrongs that were committed against young boys and girls while in the care of the state? Does he agree that it is time for the same thing to happen here?

Furthermore, has the Minister been in receipt of any feasibility studies in the past couple of years, which could improve the efficiency of acute and primary care services on a cross-border basis?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr McDevitt should be aware that

the Executive have taken a view on the Ryan report as a result of a debate in the House, and that I am preparing options for the Executive. Part of that preparation has involved me writing to each Department to seek their views on the need for a public inquiry, the scope that such an inquiry would have and the Northern Ireland Office's role in respect of compensation. I note that in a recent press release, Mr McDevitt called on me to provide compensation for survivors, but that is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office.

I have received responses from all Departments. However, I am still awaiting a definitive response from the Department of Education, because its first response suggested that it did not have a major role to play. I wrote to that Department in October 2009, it replied on 23 December 2009, and I wrote to it again in January, explaining what I believe its relevance to be in this matter. The Department of Education is responsible for primary and secondary schools, residential children's homes, some of which are accommodating children on behalf of the Department, and special needs schools. Therefore, the Department has a key input to the Executive's response. When I receive input from the Department of Education, I will be able to put my options paper to the Executive, the substantial part of that work having already been done, and the Executive will express a view. That is the way forward. It is not for me, as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and with a small part of the responsibility in this area, to take the issue forward. It is a matter for the Executive as a whole.

I note that in his press release, Mr McDevitt said that the Executive have a responsibility to abuse survivors. We could excuse that and say that he made a mistake and that the communications guru did not check his press release. However, the trivialisation of what is, and will continue to be, a very important issue for large numbers of people in Northern Ireland is a piece of carelessness and an oversight, which is very surprising. If the input from Mr McDevitt on the issue is producing a press release headline of:

"McDevitt: Executive has responsibility to abuse survivors",

it would seem that he is more interested in backing into the limelight than supporting survivors.

In relation to the provision of acute and primary care services on a North/South basis, my responsibility is for the health and social care of people in Northern Ireland, and Mary Harney has a similar responsibility for people in the Republic of Ireland. Where we can work together to promote issues of mutual benefit, we will do so, and an example of such co-operation is the GP out-of-hours service. However, I must report to the House that that service has had a very disappointing response and will be difficult to sustain given the number of individuals who have availed themselves of it on a cross-border basis. In my statement to the House, I explained that I am also examining the new Altnagelvin radiotherapy unit. A business case is being prepared for that facility, which will allow input from the Irish Republic through capital and resource investment. Providing agreement can be reached on a cross-border basis, people in Donegal will be able to make use of that facility. Therefore, we will be providing for our own needs, and extra provision will allow the residents of Donegal to benefit. That is how we can work together.

As far as our acute sector is concerned, I am sure that Mr McDevitt is well aware that there are charges in the Irish Republic. A different system is operated there, and there are charges throughout, which some 70% of the population pay. There are charges to see a doctor, to go to A&E or to stay overnight in an acute hospital. To marry all that together if it were a practical step that would benefit the people of Northern Ireland would be a huge task, but I currently do not see the benefits of doing so.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. Although the statement provides only two pages of information, I note that some 15 issues were discussed. That proves that the meeting was worthwhile.

I want to ask the Minister about the food safety promotional activities, which the Irish Heart Foundation and the Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke Association supported. A community food initiatives project was launched in Belfast on 27 January 2010. Can the Minister tell us whether any results have emanated from that? We hope that there will be some positive results, although perhaps it is too early to tell. It would be interesting to know the outcome of that project, because the promotion of safe food is important to the health of any society.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not have the details of the event in January because I did not attend it, but Safefood certainly complements what we are about in Northern Ireland. The Member will be aware that last April I set up the Public Health Agency, and one of the key driving issues of that agency is improving public health through diets, safe food, and so on. Safefood has operated a successful anti-salt initiative, which mirrors what has been going on in the UK as a whole. Those sorts of things have complemented each other, although I see a lot of the future work in Northern Ireland falling within the remit of the Public Health Agency.

There is a need to press down, and the Member rightly identified the social determinants of ill health. People find themselves in hospital, and had they been able to make different lifestyle choices at the right time in their lives, eventually they would be less likely to find themselves in hospital. However, people do not always have the freedom to make such choices. That is part of the strategy that we are taking forward through public health initiatives. Safefood complements that, and some actions make sense on an all-island basis. However, I am also conscious of the actions that are flowing on a UK-wide basis, and the Public Health Agency fits in very closely with those. Although the other countries in the UK do not have public health agencies, they are looking very closely at our experience and are considering that sort of step.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr Speaker, I hope that you will forgive me for putting on record that the SDLP is fast losing its patience with the messing about of the Minister and others on North/South Ministerial Council matters, which, after all, form strand two of the Good Friday Agreement. I would have thought that the health and well-being of one's citizens would be of paramount importance to all Members. Given that, North/South co-operation on health and social care matters is a no-brainer.

I note that the Minister did not answer my colleague Mr McDevitt's question. It was a yes or no answer. Is he in receipt of a feasibility study on acute health matters — yes or no?

The element of the Minister's statement that deals with cancer research said that the Council discussed the report 'Cancer Incidence, Mortality, Treatment and Survival in the North and South of Ireland: 1994-2004'. That was completed in

2004, but the Council is having a discussion about it five years later. We all have friends and family who have been diagnosed with cancer and who are receiving treatment, and we want to know whether the Minister and his counterpart in the South are grasping the maximum opportunities to tackle cancer.

Why has work on the proposed development of an enteric reference service been deferred? Will the Minister give an indication of some of the new work streams that are under his remit on the NSMC health subgroup?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member asked quite a few questions, and although I am entitled to answer only one, I will try to work through those questions.

My statement reported on our work progress. The enteric reference service is a matter of resource. The Member will be aware that Northern Ireland has a good record in developing cancer services — for example, on waiting lists. I am now ready for the next step. Mrs Kelly's party colleague Mrs Bradley has played an important part in lobbying for the proposed centre in Altnagelvin Area Hospital as a satellite of Belfast City Hospital's cancer centre.

I explained my North/South co-operation with Mary Harney. The acute sector provides for the people of Northern Ireland. Arrangements among various areas of Northern Ireland are in place — for example, in paediatric cardiac services — and a joint North/South paediatric service will be established.

I will not spend money on feasibility studies but on particular proposals. The notion of a feasibility study for the establishment of all-Ireland acute hospitals is not on my radar at all. We work with the Dublin Government. If the SDLP is unhappy, it can express that unhappiness in writing, and I shall respond as best I can. My first responsibility is to the people of Northern Ireland, and I work with Mary Harney on matters of mutual benefit. If I cannot find mutual benefit, I do not have an issue on which to work.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Final Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to move

That the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 10/08] do now pass.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I thank the Minister for moving the Final Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. Before I go any further, I declare that I am a member of Craigavon Borough Council and that I am a member of the voluntary transition committee for Craigavon, Armagh and Banbridge.

11.15 am

On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Final Stage of this important Bill, which is the first to come through the Committee in the review of public administration (RPA) process. The wide-ranging Bill is needed to clarify the powers of district councils to enter into long-term service contracts with the private sector; to enable councils to acquire land otherwise than by agreement for waste management purposes; to make preliminary arrangements for the reorganisation of local government; to establish statutory transition committees for the purpose of preparing for and giving full effect to the reorganisation of local government; and to 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 23 June 2009. Members conducted a detailed scrutiny, making recommendations and prompting amendments where those were deemed to be necessary. The Committee considered the following issues to be key to the Bill: funding for the process and the impact of the reorganisation of local government on ratepayers; the constitution and powers of the statutory transition committees and the role of local authorities and the Department following their establishment; the need for communication and ongoing consultation as the Bill becomes law and as secondary legislation is implemented; the widening of the power for a district council to acquire land other than by agreement and the enforceability of disposals made in contravention of a direction; the benefit of including additional vires in the Bill to enhance waste providers' confidence in entering into

waste management agreements; the inclusion in the Bill of provisions for community planning and well-being; the power to enter into contracts being applied retrospectively; and the timing of the availability of the severance scheme for councillors.

The Committee outlined its recommendations for the Bill at Consideration Stage. However, I wish to highlight particular areas of concern that members had. The first was funding, which remains a key issue. Several councils and organisations expressed concern about the funding for the review of public administration process. The councils stressed the importance of appropriate and adequate funding being devolved along with the functions that are being passed to local authorities. Although the Minister has clearly indicated to the Committee that he is committed to providing central government funding to be combined with a requirement for local government funding, the Committee is awaiting his response on exactly where that split will fall. The Committee is also keen to know whether the Minister will reconsider his selection of the fifth option for implementing the RPA process, which is outlined in the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) economic appraisal, should it become apparent that one of the other four options is preferable. I know that the Minister has made fairly robust commitments on the fifth proposal and that he is awaiting some feedback from NILGA (Northern Ireland Local Government Association) on the matter, which, I think, will be with him later this week.

Another key issue that the Committee identified was the composition of the statutory transition committees. The Committee was concerned that there was a lack of clarity on specific references to particular councils and the relevant transition committees. It agreed to recommend that an amendment should be made to provide for direct representation of the existing councils of Castlereagh and Lisburn on the Belfast statutory transition committee. I am pleased that the Department has taken that on board, and I welcome the Department's acceptance of Committee recommendations for amendments to the relevant clauses. The Committee also recognised the importance of having balanced statutory transition committees but accepted that much of that, such as the gender balance, is in the hands of individual parties.

The Committee was particularly concerned about proposals for statutory transition committees to have the power to stop councils entering

into major capital and non-capital contracts. Members felt that that could be overly restrictive and counterproductive. The Department stressed the importance of statutory transition committees having a responsibility to protect the interests of new councils, but it was also acknowledged that, to some extent, that was an inevitable consequence of moving straight to statutory transition committees and of not having shadow councils. Consequently, the Committee suggested that there should be an amendment to the Bill to allow for an appeals mechanism through which individual councils could challenge a decision made by a statutory transition committee. The Committee, therefore, welcomed the Department's acceptance of that suggestion and the subsequent inclusion of an amendment to allow for the Department's intervention where there is a disagreement between a council and the statutory transition committee.

During last year's discussions about the forthcoming waste Bill, local authorities and the waste management groups made the Committee aware that additional powers were urgently required to enhance the confidence of waste providers and financiers to enter into waste management agreements. During Committee Stage, the Department indicated its intention to bring forward those waste vires and to include them in this Bill. That will help us to meet our European obligations on increasing recycling and reducing landfill waste and will thereby reduce costs to ratepayers. The Committee welcomed and endorsed that proposal.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister for addressing our concerns and, in response to the Committee's scrutiny, for bringing forward all the suggested amendments. Before I finish, I want to stress that good communication was another important area of which the Committee was very mindful, but which it could not address through legislation. The Department must ensure the provision of ongoing comprehensive information for those directly involved at central and local government level, and who are perhaps worried about their future employment or job location, are trying to maintain staff morale, or are simply trying to provide an ongoing acceptable level of service while they are uncertain about changes that may or may not be around the corner. We must not lose sight of those who are indirectly affected by the process. We must never forget the

need and, indeed, our duty to keep ratepayers well informed, well protected and well served throughout what is a significant period of upheaval and uncertainty.

Once again, I offer my thanks and appreciation to Committee staff and departmental officials for their hard work in assisting the Committee during its scrutiny of the Bill. I believe that the outcome of that hard work is improved legislation, and the Committee looks forward to the introduction of the other local government Bills. However, we are concerned about the ongoing delay in relation to those Bills. I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that the Committee has worked well with him and his Department in seeing this legislation through and that no fault lies with the Committee or with local government in relation to the ongoing delays.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg your indulgence as I add my condemnation of the bomb in Newry to that of other Members. I reiterate that there is no support in my district or my community for that type of action and activity.

I pay tribute to departmental officials and Committee staff and to all who contributed to bringing the Bill to the Chamber. I highlight to the Minister that the Bill is one of a number that have come through the Committee that should be of benefit to, and have impact on, local ratepayers and local councils. I welcome the Bill.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council, and my dad is a councillor on Larne Borough Council.

In common with other Members, I welcome the Bill's Final Stage. It is another step on the road to local government reorganisation and it looks increasingly likely to have been the smoothest by far.

Minister Foster, the former Environment Minister, got the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill wrong, as it was subject to accelerated passage, which prevented appropriate scrutiny. I understand that the draft local government reorganisation Bill is held up in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as a result of a dysfunctional Executive. That contrasts starkly with the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which has progressed well.

The Bill contains provisions that have been accepted as being necessary, and where the Committee believed that improvements could be made, the Minister agreed, a consensus was reached, and amendments were made. That is how a legislative Assembly should work, and, again, this Bill stands in stark contrast to other legislation. The Committee had consultations, took evidence, and identified ways to improve aspects of the legislation. Discussions were had with the Department, and amendments were laid. I hope that that method will be followed in future, as it results in good legislation.

The contents of the Bill are not particularly exciting and are unlikely to be headline news. Nevertheless, there are some very important aspects of the Bill that must be welcomed. In the future, ratepayers will welcome many of the Bill's provisions if they are applied appropriately. The Bill provides for councils to increase outsourcing and to provide better value on some of the large-scale contracts that will be required to meet European directives. If appropriately applied, provisions in the Bill will bring savings to councils and ratepayers. For that to happen, and I have said it before, councils will need to deal very carefully with such outsourcing. However, it is good that councils are finally being allowed to explore that aspect of competitive working in the private sector to try to reduce costs to ratepayers.

There is proven private sector expertise operating widely throughout Europe, particularly in recycling. There are methods of working and processes that can provide opportunities for reducing costs in the future, which are not being applied here.

The Bill also provides for the transition committees to be established as statutory local government bodies. Those committees are a necessary tool in the reorganisation that will begin the harmonisation of the 26 councils that will make up the 11 amalgamated councils that the Assembly approved. Although the Ulster Unionist Party favoured a 15-council model and a shadow period, we accept that, given the decisions that have been taken, that is a reasonable method of commencing the integration of the new councils and will be in the interests of ratepayers.

The Bill provides that existing councils cannot dispose of land or assets without the approval of their transition committees. As

was pointed out, an appeals process was felt to be necessary, which was accepted by the Department.

It is right that the transition committees should have an oversight role in the disposal of land and assets, because that land and those assets may have a wider use to the transition committees and the new councils. Therefore, it is appropriate that assets are carefully looked after and not just narrowly so, as could be the case with current councils. It is right that there should be a method of seeking permission and a method of appeal, because we are aware that there are some contentious transition committees, and it is important that the process is seen to be fair. I am pleased that the appeal mechanism has been accepted.

I support the Bill and ask the Minister to ensure that further legislation affecting local government follows the same path so that there is scrutiny and an opportunity to take evidence in Committee to improve legislation. We are making legislation that may apply for many decades, and it is important that we make it the best possible. If a Bill can be improved, we should be open to that. I hope that accelerated passage will not be used for further legislation, because it would limit the ability of the Committee and the Assembly to improve legislation.

Mr Ford: I declare my membership of Antrim Borough Council, although I am not sure that anything that I say in my contribution will relate to that. I join others, particularly the Committee Chairperson, in thanking the departmental officials and the Committee staff for the assistance that Committee members received as the Bill went through an extensive, but very worthwhile, Committee Stage. We addressed a number of amendments that have significantly improved the Bill.

As Roy Beggs said, the Bill will probably turn out to be the easiest piece of local government reform to go through the Committee or the House, because it involved relatively little contention, and there was openness on the part of the departmental officials to consider the views that were put forward by the Committee. Other pieces of legislation should already have been considered in Committee and been before the House. However, some such legislation has yet to leave the Executive. I trust that

accelerated passage will not be used as a remedy to that situation.

Given that the Bill has miscellaneous provisions, I am sure that I am entitled to talk about what has not appeared in it as well as what has, although I will not stretch your indulgence too far, Mr Speaker. We have seen, and discussed yesterday at length, the serious issue of the failure to get the boundaries Order, which is a key part of enabling processes to move forward, before the House. I am not sure how, at this stage, we can ask departmental officials to come to the Committee with secondary legislation on statutory transition committees if the Minister cannot agree the boundaries of councils with his Executive colleagues. The failure to agree on boundaries will have a particular knock-on effect on the Lisburn and Castlereagh area and the extended Belfast area.

Therefore, the delay is having a major impact on another issue of concern and on the outworking of the Bill. There is no point in us providing for the ability to have transition committees if we are not going to see the secondary legislation to implement them at an early stage. That is clearly a matter of great concern.

11.30 am

We understood that the matter needed to be resolved by the end of January. By my count, we have now reached the fifty-fourth day of January, and it is getting beyond a joke that such simple matters still have not been addressed. However, when we discussed the issue yesterday, we heard a rant from the Minister, who complained about local government's attitude to the financial issues rather than recognise that the current failings lie with him and his Executive colleagues, who have not put forward serious proposals to make progress on boundaries. Let us hope that the Bill's passing will ensure that the Minister and his colleagues engage more and make things happen. Otherwise, we will slip further behind the already dangerously short timetable for completing local government reform properly.

The legislation has major knock-on effects for councils that were looking forward to piloting new planning policies. A while ago, the Minister told the Committee for the Environment that every council would probably not have a planning office. However, the best transition committee in this non-statutory phase is probably the Antrim and Newtownabbey transition committee. Here

my declared interest is relevant. That transition committee is, of course, aided by the fact that my party colleague Councillor Oran Keenan of Antrim Borough Council ably co-chairs it.

Antrim and Newtownabbey transition committee has been looking forward for months and months to having the opportunity to do something about the lack of growth not only in the Newtownabbey half of the new council area, where the Belfast metropolitan action plan (BMAP) is a somewhat extended process, but in Antrim, Ballymena and Larne, which are now way beyond any timescale for a new area plan. Indeed, the Antrim area plan ran out in 2001 and has not been replaced, yet the transition committee does not have the opportunity to build on the planning process, because the Government cannot sort out the boundaries proposal. The Minister must respond on that point.

I welcome other provisions in the Bill, such as councils' ability to enter into contracts with the private sector. The permissive powers contained in Part 1 on contracts of councils are very much at variance with what is regarded as the Minister's prescriptive requirement to implement a business services organisation. We await with interest what comes back from the strategic leadership board in the near future, as councils work up their own alternatives, which may prove to be as financially beneficial but much more democratic than the business services organisation, which the Minister suggested yesterday he was intent on railroading councils into accepting whether they wanted it or not.

Similarly, given the delay, we must consider why severance payments for councillors have been included in the Bill. Unless there is some speedy movement, the concept of providing severance payments so that long-serving councillors will be replaced in the run-up to the election in May 2011 and not in May 2011 will not be addressed. New councillors can neither be appointed nor gain experience if severance payments cannot be agreed much earlier than they should have been. We are a long way short of meeting the target of having severance payments in place at least one year in advance.

Therefore, I agree with the Committee's comments. Yes, the Bill has been worthwhile, and its legislative stages have resulted good legislation. However, the fact that the Bill is about to be passed while so many other aspects of local government reform are left

hanging leads me to have some of the same concerns that Roy Beggs expressed, such as the question of whether the House will be asked to support accelerated passage for future Bills, given how bad accelerated passage proved for the Local Government (Boundaries) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which failed to deal with the sort of issues that are now tripping up the Minister. We also need to ensure that the Executive deadlock on all aspects of local government reform is ended and that secondary legislation, particularly on transition committees, is introduced at an early stage. I trust that the Minister will give us some assurance of that, although I doubt that it will be forthcoming at the end of this debate.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to speak today, because I made my maiden speech at the Bill's Second Stage. Although that may seem recent to Members, it was more than eight months ago that I spoke on the subject as the new boy. I declare an interest as a south Antrim councillor. I will be brief, unlike my colleague to the right, although much of what he said was very important.

I was pleased to have been able, at least, along with John McCallister, to put a mark on the Bill in the form of an amendment to the provisions relating to severance pay. I reiterate that I will not take severance pay should it come my way. The amendment was tabled to make sure that Members of the Assembly, Westminster and the European Parliament with dual mandates would not be paid twice for the work that they do. However, I want to praise, as others have, the work that the transition committees are doing. They put in long hours, it is very complicated, and a lot of good work is being done, especially in South Antrim, as my colleague Mr Ford said. I also want to praise the hard work of councillors who have put years in with no pension. Many of them, at the beginning, got no pay.

It is sad that we have had the problems that still exist with the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. I look forward to those problems being resolved as quickly as possible. There are many other problems, as Members have heard, and I look forward to those being resolved as well. The Committee has much more work to do on the Bills that are coming forward. I particularly look forward to the proposed clean neighbourhood Bill, which is part of the reorganisation of local government. On behalf of

my party, I thank all the Committee officials and others who have been involved.

Mr Dallat: Mr Mayor — sorry. *[Laughter.]* That is probably for next year.

I am sure that we all wish the new member of the Alliance Party in Antrim well. He has all the qualifications for fitting into the Alliance Party. I declare an interest as a member of Coleraine Borough Council, which, I hope, will only be for a day or two more until the Minister gets all the legislation in place that will allow me to leave.

As a member of the Environment Committee, I welcome the Bill. On the assumption that we will have new councils next year — at the moment, we do not seem to be sure — there is a need to make the necessary provisions and to articulate our views and concerns about the future and what it holds for ratepayers across the North. Many of those concerns have been addressed in the Committee's evidence sessions and communications with the Minister. That is the role of a scrutiny Committee, and it did its job extremely well.

In the days and years ahead, the environment will be a major concern for the new councils, as well as the way they manage their waste disposal activities. There are already comforting indications that, at last, that task is being taken seriously. That is something to build on. I do not wish to destroy the Minister's reputation, but I am pleased with some of his recent utterances about waste being local and all that. He can put that in his manifesto next time round.

The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill contains a new legal right to acquire land other than by agreement for waste management purposes. The acquisition of land other than by agreement is always the last resort and is not to be recommended. Local communities are fundamentally affected by the imposition of landfill sites, leading to concern, anger, frustration and fear. I know that well from my constituency, where communities have been turned upside down, not because of the compulsory acquisition of land for such purposes but because of the greed of landowners who see landfill as a lucrative way of making millions out of that type of business. I doubt whether the rights of those communities are adequately covered in the Bill.

The inclusion of provisions for community planning and well-being is a major issue, and

can make or break the communities that we live in. I hope that the inclusion of those provisions presents a new opportunity for communities to become involved in the shaping of the environment in which they live, because the past has been a sorry failure. Of course, we cannot blame the present Minister for that.

We use clichés like “balanced communities”, but in the past that has been nothing more than an aspiration, a dream seldom realised. Let us hope that the new legislation will empower people to protect their communities and save them from the ravages of developers who would, quite literally, build on town squares if they thought that they could get away with it. Will the Bill give us the power to protect seaside resorts — places like Portballintrae, Portstewart, Portrush and Castlerock? Whole communities have been wiped out by the excesses of those who focused only on apartments, luxury villas and monstrosities that are totally out of character, form no part of the local environment and, most certainly, do not serve the needs of our people.

Cost takes centre stage in all of this change, and councillors should not be condemned for expressing opposition to the notion that the financial burden should be placed on local ratepayers.

Members will not be surprised that I endorse the sentiments of the Committee Chairperson, Dolores Kelly, who has called for well-informed communication. People want to know what is happening, when it is happening and the implications for them. They also want to know the implications for the communities they serve.

The Minister of the Environment: As regards the final comments of Mr Dallat, I am absolutely shocked that the SDLP has achieved unanimity among its members in the House today. That is quite unusual for the party, and I congratulate it.

I do not intend to rehearse much of what has been said. The purpose of the Bill is to clarify the power of district councils to enter into long-term service contracts and to enable the Department of the Environment to make preliminary arrangements for the reorganisation of local government. I thank the Committee and the Chairperson for their work in completing the process efficiently and effectively. The Committee made relevant recommendations that the Department was happy to endorse and include in the Bill. The work has been useful, as has the working relationship.

I realise that the Bill concerns miscellaneous provisions, which seemed to give Members the opportunity to introduce any topic to the debate. The Committee Chairperson, Mrs Kelly, asked whether there were options other than option 5. Option 1 is the “do nothing” option, which would leave councils as they are. That would not cost anything but would not save anything. Options 2 and 3 would lead to the amalgamation of councils but would lead to negative costs and no real collaboration. Option 4 would involve modest collaboration. I will clarify a figure that I referred to yesterday: I said that option 4 would offer £156 million in savings; the figure is actually £159 million. However, it would also incur £118 million of upfront costs. Option 5 would involve £118 million of upfront costs and offer £438 million in savings.

I am surprised and disappointed that, having thrown down the gauntlet yesterday, the people who have come back to have another wee stab at me have failed so miserably in identifying the flaws in their arguments. They are suggesting that I proceed with an option that would mean spending £118 million upfront now to save £159 million over 25 years. The logic of following that particular process is flawed. It is untenable, unworkable and unrealistic. Therefore, those who said during the debate yesterday that they were wholly opposed to a single waste authority and a business services organisation are saying that they do not want to proceed with reform and reorganisation. If we cannot drive efficiencies through, we will not drive the reorganisation through, because this is about delivering efficiencies and better local government. It is about delivering local government that has more powers and doing so in a way that will cost ratepayers less money, not more.

I know that some councils do not mind charging ratepayers more and that year on year they pile rate increases and pain on to the ratepayers. I am not one of those who intend to pile more pain on to the ratepayers. People can criticise me all they like on the issue, but they will find me wholly inflexible when it comes to adding more pain and asking ratepayers to pay more tax. I will not do that. I want to get a better deal for ratepayers. Some Members may want a worse deal for ratepayers, but I will not take the House to that position.

11.45 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment:

I know that the Minister's remarks are aimed at Sinn Féin, which indicated yesterday that it is not in agreement; that is my conclusion. However, he must also acknowledge that his party is represented on NILGA, which also rebutted the fifth option.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have had patience with Members this morning. However, a number of Members have moved beyond discussion of the Bill to the extent that we have almost moved on to a subject that has already been discussed in the House. I remind the entire House to keep to the Final Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill as far as possible.

The Minister of the Environment: Thank you for rebuking us all, Mr Speaker; I will pay attention to your words.

Mr Ford said that a business services organisation was not democratic. Given that we have not established the parameters of the business services organisation, how can he make such a statement? The business services organisation will be established by local authorities in a way that will ensure democratic accountability and control. It was never intended that the business services organisation would be under any form of governance other than the governance of local authorities. What has been proposed will ensure democratic control. One cannot make outlandish statements that the organisation does not have democratic control, given that it has not yet been set up and that local government will remain in control when it is set up.

Most of the other issues have been debated adequately in the House, either today or previously. I thank Members for their co-operation. I trust that I will receive as much co-operation in delivering all the other parts of the Bill and that we will be able to move forward on the issue together.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 10/08] do now pass.

Draft CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2010

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to move

That the draft CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2010 be approved.

The Order is laid under powers that provide for the creation of trading schemes in the Climate Change Act 2008. It is also being laid in Scotland, Wales and Westminster; indeed, it will be debated in Wales and the House of Commons today. The Climate Change Act 2008, which the Assembly approved, sets legally binding targets. Our Programme for Government targets aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2025. We have also committed to making the government estate carbon neutral by 2015.

We need to improve energy efficiency to achieve those targets. Increased energy efficiency brings the added benefits of saving businesses money, making our economy more competitive and improving security of supply. The scheme is aimed at large public and private sector organisations, which account for 10% of the UK's carbon emissions. Across the UK, the scheme is expected to deliver emissions savings of at least four million tons of carbon dioxide per year by 2020. It will also save participants around £1 billion per year by 2020 through cost-effective energy efficiency measures that are not yet being taken up.

The carbon reduction commitment requires participants to abate emissions or purchase allowances. It encourages the implementation of energy efficiency strategies in a way that suits the business model and will bring cost savings and efficiencies to the organisation without affecting its profitability. In 2005, the Carbon Trust published a study that recognised that, despite the great potential for reductions, emissions from large electricity users had remained relatively constant for around 20 years. That prompted the UK Government to develop a scheme to tackle the problem, and the carbon reduction commitment was thereby proposed. Although the policy is led by the UK Government, it has been developed jointly with Ministers and officials in the devolved Administrations.

The scheme applies to all public and private organisations that have at least one half-hourly

meter settled on the half-hourly market and use more than 6,000 megawatt hours of electricity through all their half-hourly meters. Roughly speaking, that is equivalent to an electricity bill of £500,000 a year. It is estimated that 5,000 organisations will be full participants, with about 100 of them based uniquely in Northern Ireland.

Government will lead by example. The Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly Government and all central government Departments in England and Northern Ireland will participate in the CRC, even where they do not meet the qualification threshold. Participants will be required to identify and report their electricity, gas or fuel-related emissions annually. Domestic housing and transport emissions are excluded. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency will audit and verify reports here. That resource cost will be met through subsistence fees that participants pay as part of the scheme.

Participants are required to surrender a CRC allowance for every ton of carbon dioxide emitted because of their reported energy supplies. Those allowances can be purchased from the annual government sale or in the secondary market. After each year, the GB Environment Agency, as the scheme administrator, will publish a league table ranking participants by how effectively they have reduced their emissions and become more energy-efficient.

All revenue raised from the annual sale of allowances will be recycled back to participants according to how well they perform in the league table. The table will provide clear evidence of the organisations that are most energy-efficient, creating a reputational driver. The information will be available to investors, the public and other companies procuring goods and services. The scheme will need oversight at the highest level in organisations and will be a catalyst for senior managers overcoming organisational inertia through the need for a clear energy management plan. For high performers, the revenue recycling adds an additional financial incentive on top of savings on energy bills.

There are specific Northern Ireland aspects to the scheme that I would like to draw to the attention of the House. It is intended that schools will eventually participate as part of the education and skills authority when it is set up. Until then, the legislation provides for schools to be included with education and library boards

or the Department of Education as appropriate. Street lighting in Northern Ireland will be exempt in phase 1 of the scheme. That was due to the uncertainty about the outcome of the review of public administration when the policy was being finalised. It will be included from 2013. All other public sectors, including health and water, will be treated consistently across the UK.

I thank my Executive colleagues for their continued and unanimous support for CRC. Committing Departments to participate on a mandatory basis demonstrates leadership and highlights our dedication to achieving the Programme for Government targets. Of course, proposing the Order would not have been possible without the ongoing support of the Committee for the Environment. Committee members commented on the developing policy and legislation on numerous occasions over the past few years, and their observations were always a welcome input. I especially want to thank the Chairperson and the previous Chairperson for their diligence as I sought to bring this legislation to the Assembly.

The draft Order received full legal scrutiny by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and by the House of Lords Select Committee on the Merits of Statutory Instruments and was approved without amendment. The Committee for the Environment has considered the draft Order, and no objections were raised. Finally, the Assembly demonstrated a willingness to support policies that promote energy efficiency and deliver environmental benefits by passing the Climate Change Act 2008. The CRC energy efficiency scheme is the first Statutory Instrument to be delivered under the vires of that Act and is a key driver to deliver our aims. I commend the draft Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly):

I support the motion. The Minister has set out the purpose of the Statutory Instrument clearly, and I will not spend time repeating that.

The Committee for the Environment was first informed by the Department of proposals for a mandatory cap and trading scheme to reduce carbon emissions as far back as April 2008 and received its first briefing on the scheme the following month. Although the Committee broadly supported the scheme, it was keen to be kept abreast of the role and responsibilities that would fall on the Department through

managing the UK-wide scheme in Northern Ireland. It also wanted to be kept informed about the all-important question of the resources that would be involved.

The Department continued to keep the Committee informed as it liaised with other regions to develop the details of the scheme, and it gave further oral briefings to the Committee in February 2009 and November 2009. In response to members' queries, the Department outlined the fines and penalties, the cost of administering the scheme and details of how audits would be carried out. It also informed the Committee of the expected number of participants and how those organisations would be informed of their new responsibilities under the scheme.

The Department stressed that the scheme would have overall financial benefits, but it was unable to take a pro rata amount of the UK figure to determine the specific cost benefit to Northern Ireland. However, the Committee was advised that the reduction in emissions resulting from the scheme would contribute to the North's Programme for Government target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 25% below 1990 levels by 2025.

At its meeting on 4 February 2010, the Committee formally considered the draft Statutory Instrument. We noted that, when the House of Lords and House of Commons Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments considered the draft Statutory Instrument on 27 January 2010, it had no concerns and agreed to support it. Therefore, I support the motion on behalf of the Committee for the Environment.

Mr Weir: I support the motion that has been tabled by the Minister. In the spirit of the motion, I intend my speech to be environmentally friendly by recycling the remarks of the Minister and the Chairperson. If I say anything novel, Members should challenge me because I will have strayed off script.

It is good to see such a healthy interest in the debate. Around the Chamber, I see current Committee members and Brian Wilson, who has a keen interest in such matters. It is also good to see that Sammy Gardiner, who is a former member of the Committee, is here to lend his support.

The proposals represent a win-win situation for everyone. Environmentally, the proposals help

to make a contribution to the 25% emissions target with which Northern Ireland is challenged. It is also a win-win from the point of view of industry and the economy. Companies in Northern Ireland will potentially save money as a result of the proposals, because they will make them operate in a much more energy-efficient way.

I have already been successful in clearing the Public Gallery; perhaps another five minutes of my speech will empty the Chamber. The proposals are a major advantage for companies. They are the sort of sensible environmental policy that even the former Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, would feel compelled to support.

Mr Beggs: That is going too far.

Mr Weir: Some Members may heckle that I went too far in saying that, but good work can be done to increase energy efficiency. I am glad, for instance, that the Carbon Trust is involved.

The Chairperson did not refer to the visit by several Committee members to the Tayto factory before Christmas — some may view that as a jaunt — to examine the key issue of energy efficiency. I have abiding memories of tasting a range of crisps at Tayto Castle, and we were shown the clever way in which Tayto has worked with the Carbon Trust on becoming energy-efficient. There was a particular focus on the proper use of waste products: for example, the oils that emerge from the process but cannot be sold are used to generate further energy. That contains the energy as much as possible and makes Tayto's operations much more energy-efficient. That provides another example of a win-win situation: it is good for the environment that waste products are used in that way, and, because it can save money, it is good for the company. The Tayto example should be embraced.

12.00 noon

As the Minister indicated, although the scheme will be introduced UK-wide, there is a strong made-in-Northern-Ireland feel to it. It has not simply been worked out at Westminster and imposed on the devolved regions. Departmental officials and the Minister have worked to ensure that the elements that are relevant to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are based on local circumstances.

The Minister pointed out that approximately 100 companies that are unique to Northern Ireland

will be part of the scheme. Companies will be incentivised by carbon trading and league tables and, therefore, will be financially rewarded directly. People involved in procurement will increasingly consider companies' green or ethical records, and the publication of companies' energy-efficiency targets and information about their success or otherwise in that regard will provide those people with a useful guide and will incentivise companies to meet their targets and to be more environmentally friendly.

I am glad to see the involvement of public sector as well as private sector organisations, and I was particularly pleased when the Minister referred to schools. A number of schools have already embraced energy efficiency and green initiatives, including, for example, in my constituency, Ballyholme Primary School, which successfully installed solar panels. I suspect that Brian Wilson will cite other examples in my constituency. Such measures not only afford schools an opportunity to benefit financially from the exercise, but can be used as an educational tool to show pupils a better way forward. Consequently, all aspects of the scheme make sense, and I am happy to commend the motion to the House.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion. The CRC energy efficiency scheme is to be welcomed, and in addition to helping us to meet CO₂ emission reduction targets, it will go some way to improving energy efficiency in large public and private sector organisations. However, to ensure that we meet our PFG targets, government must bring forward more initiatives.

The scheme will be mandatory, and participating organisations will have to monitor their emissions and purchase allowances for each ton of CO₂ that they emit. The scheme should not be seen as prohibitive or as a measure that will hold businesses back. On the contrary, it will give businesses an opportunity to demonstrate that they are playing their part in reducing carbon emissions, and massive savings will arise from participation in the scheme. Energy bills will be cut, overheads will be reduced and the savings should be well in excess of the cost of participating in the scheme.

I must also point out that before the initiative was brought forward, many businesses throughout the Six Counties were already showing leadership. Mr Weir referred to one

example, and in my constituency, Michelin has lodged a planning application for wind turbines within its estate, and that will significantly cut its energy costs. Under the proposed legislation, any organisation that refuses to participate in the scheme and does not comply with its legal obligations will be subject to financial penalties. The ability to issue such penalties is essential to ensure that the more reluctant parties live up to their responsibilities.

As Members said, all Departments in the North must participate in the CRC energy efficiency scheme, regardless of whether they meet the qualification threshold. People expect the Government to lead, and when it comes to tackling energy efficiency and ensuring that, as the Minister said, we make the government estate carbon neutral by 2012, that provision will place local government on the front line. I do not want to go into any more detail, as previous Members and the Minister have already done so, and they have covered it sufficiently. However, suffice it to say, the initiative has environmental and economic benefits, and from my party's perspective, we support the initiative.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, welcome and support the draft Order. As Members have heard, the carbon reduction commitment energy efficiency scheme is a wide initiative, which is due to start in April. It is aimed at the large organisations that contribute significantly to the emission problems that exist in Northern Ireland. We need to raise awareness and to improve our energy efficiency, and the scheme will cause that to happen.

Unless Members emigrated, they will have experienced this winter's appalling weather and the questions about how and whether it is being caused by us or whether it is just happening naturally. People suffered it through November, December and January, and on the back of that, there was also appalling flooding in Fermanagh. That affects all our businesses, and that is why we must support what is happening today.

In agriculture, we need to be able to grow our crops, feed our animals and, of course, feed ourselves. In the fisheries industry, matters could be even worse if we do not get things right. Last year, I attended a talk that Queen's University had set up on the management of seabeds, and a very bleak picture was painted of what would happen if we did not manage things properly. Once again, emissions will affect that. The fishing industry employs some

1,200 people and raises some £100 million a year for the local economy. Therefore, we need to concentrate hard on ensuring that we make it all work. However, the Environment Committee told us that we will not hit our emission targets given our current road usage, whether that is for cargo or cars, and that frightens me. Therefore, we need to look at how we manage things in the Committee for Regional Development to reduce our road usage.

In construction, we also have to be aware that bad weather, which causes flooding and everything else, makes construction much harder. I support the CRC scheme. We must all take it on board.

In my patch in South Antrim, Antrim Area Hospital has a wind turbine, and we need to see much more of that. On the back of the scheme, there must be initiatives to help industries and businesses to take on new energy forms and to reduce their emissions. In the future, I would like to see all businesses and politicians working incredibly hard, so that we make this a better place for our children and our grandchildren. I support the motion.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the introduction of the draft Order. In deference to my colleague from South Antrim, I shall endeavour to be as brief as he was on this occasion. Therefore, I shall not engage in Peter Weir's process of recycling everything that everybody else has said. I cannot even mention my constituency example of the wind turbine at Antrim Area Hospital, as it has already been mentioned.

If I had any concern about some of the targets that were set some years ago, it was that the suggestion of a 25% reduction in carbon usage by 2025 was a nice aspiration for the future but was not specific enough to deal with people taking action, year on year, to get there. That is why the particular concept of carbon trading, which is introduced by the draft Order, is to be welcomed. It starts large businesses and, it has been said, the public sector on the process of looking at what needs to be done, year on year. That, in itself, will be an interesting challenge for the relatively small businesses that exist purely in Northern Ireland and for our public sector. Dealing with the whole concept of the market and carbon trading will not easily sit on the relatively small end of those organisations covered by the draft Order. Nonetheless, it is

necessary. It will be a good start to ensure that people begin to move in the right direction.

As the Minister said correctly, there will be a reputational driver, in that there is no doubt that those companies and, indeed, statutory bodies that operate well will be able to highlight that as part of the concept of a sort of marketing in which people now engage when they promote their use of fair trade products, concern for environmental issues or ethical stances in various directions. That will be a positive and, clearly, a statutorily established way for companies to demonstrate good practice. It would contribute to the leadership that is needed on the issue.

Of course, that leadership will need to extend somewhat beyond 2025. Some of us in the Chamber may not expect to be here in 2025. We may have to leave it to others among our number to carry that process forward.

I was tempted to intervene when Peter Weir discussed the Committee's visit to the Tayto factory because his comments were actually novel and interesting and did not recycle what other Members had already mentioned. I disagreed with him on one point, however, when he welcomed the fact that there was such interest from people who are either on the Environment Committee at present, have been on the Committee, or might be on it at some stage in the future.

The problem of the carbon reduction commitment, as we discussed, is that it is an issue for people who sit in this place and have particular responsibility for enterprise, health and social services, education and, indeed, for every other departmental area. Although the Assembly can welcome the fact that there has been a serious and useful discussion, the real challenge is for the Minister to keep pressure on his Executive colleagues who have indicated their willingness to accept the draft Order, and for other Assembly Members to ensure that the issue is not forgotten.

The issue is not purely for the Environment Committee: it is an issue for every Assembly Member, every significant business in Northern Ireland, every part of the public sector, and, ultimately, for all our people.

Mr Beggs: I, too, rise to support the draft CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2010. If approved, it will allow Northern Ireland's

inclusion in the UK-wide emissions trading scheme and will play a major part in reducing greenhouse gas emissions from large commercial and public sector organisations. It will introduce market forces to enable that to happen. There will be considerable pressures and incentives for those organisations to look extremely closely at their large energy consumption so that it can be brought down. It will be in their financial interest. As other Members have said, the draft Order hands individuals an opportunity to reduce their costs.

The carbon reduction commitment, which is to be in place by April 2010, will fight against climate change that has occurred. Strong scientific evidence indicates that man has contributed to climate change. The Assembly wants to try to minimise its consequences for the environment.

The draft Order will also lessen Northern Ireland's dependence on the earth's diminishing oil, gas and coal reserves. It will also limit its vulnerability at the extreme European end of the Siberian gas pipeline. The Assembly must consider a range of issues that will come into play as a result of the Order.

In the short term, large commercial and public sector organisations will have to introduce changes in order to meet their energy commitments. There may well be extra costs in the short term. However, I remind Members that not implementing carbon reduction also has a cost. There will be cost to the environment and also with regard to ever-increasing energy prices. In future, fuel bills are likely to be considerably higher. With the world's population increasing, so, too, is demand for energy. Energy supply is diminishing. The Assembly must look at conserving energy, using it as efficiently as possible, and, indeed, encouraging the use of a wide variety of renewable energies.

There are long-term advantages for companies that apply the carbon reduction commitment because by decreasing their energy consumption, over time, they can reduce their bills and save money in their pockets.

12.15 pm

The draft Order sets out rigorous enforcement procedures, and that leads me to believe that it will be likely to succeed. Those procedures could even lead to the imprisonment of anyone who deliberately provides misleading

information. That is an important aspect of the scheme. It may seem over the top, but I am sure that unscrupulous individuals and organisations may attempt to misuse the scheme for short-term financial gain. Therefore, it is appropriate that strict enforcements are in place. Such enforcements will enable the scheme to operate and will mean that it will not be subject to abuse. If the scheme is abused, stringent penalties will be applied. That shows how seriously we are taking the issue of global warming.

Approving the draft Order will be a step in the right direction and will show our commitment. We must bear that in mind. Many other countries, such as New Zealand, have gone much further, but this is our first step. I hope that the companies and public sector organisations, to which the scheme will apply, will avail themselves of the many lessons that have been learned elsewhere. In that regard, there is an issue for the public sector to consider. It needs to take in the external expertise about which organisations such as the Carbon Trust have not been advising the public sector. As I understand it, such organisations have been advising only the private sector. The very best expertise needs to be applied not only to the commercial sector but to the public sector.

Opportunities will flow from the draft Order, as pressure to reduce energy costs and the use of hydrocarbons will be applied. There are opportunities for new businesses. For example, B9 Energy Services, which is in my constituency, is already one of Europe's largest operational maintenance companies. It looks after wind farms, which are independent, and it is expanding into a range of other areas, such as anaerobic digesters. B9 Energy Services is also looking at other ways, such as the use of marine turbines, to raise energy through environmentally friendly methods. New jobs will come from the scheme, and it is important that Northern Ireland supports and encourages the opportunities that arise. That will involve and require appropriate planning regulations that will encourage companies to believe that, where they follow due process, their investment is likely to be successful.

Newmills Hydro is another example of a business in which turbines have been successfully introduced. Energy is produced without any carbon output cost.

Therefore, opportunities will flow from the draft Order, and it is important that Northern Ireland grasps all that arises. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: It is obvious that the Environment Committee enjoyed its trip to Tayto Castle, but no one has pointed out that 70% of the crop has been wiped out by the rather strange weather that we have had since the Committee's visit. I am not suggesting that the Committee had anything to do with that, but it underlines the need to support the energy efficiency scheme. People will want to ensure that the scheme is properly resourced. They will also want to ensure that it delivers on its objectives and that it achieves its targets within the stipulated time frame. Dare I say it, but management is key to its success, because it implies leadership.

The provision of financial incentives is positive, and it is more likely to produce results than focusing on the stick approach. Capping emissions is a novel and welcome approach, and the use of performance target tables enables organisations to compete with each other. Unfortunately, fines and penalties are needed to enforce the legislation, and there is a need to ensure that the fines that are imposed are collected. There is evidence that that has not always happened in the past. Regrettably, the Department has been vague about what the costs and benefits will be for Northern Ireland specifically, but that does not stop me being positive. I assume that those benefits will be highly significant.

Climate change is not an issue that can be ignored, locally or globally. Large organisations need to raise their awareness, particularly at senior level, so that they can encourage changes in behaviour and infrastructure in relation to energy efficiency. We are talking about 20,000 organisations, or 10% of the emissions accounted for in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That is highly significant. All those organisations need to familiarise themselves with the incentives that are available to achieve the aims and objectives of the scheme.

At the risk of repeating myself, I wish that we could obtain local figures. Improving energy savings is an issue for the public and private sectors, as others have said. Reducing carbon dioxide emissions is an absolute must if we are to leave this planet in any kind of decent shape for the next generation. Time is running out,

and it may have already run out for areas of the world that are currently devastated by irregular climate change.

Mr B Wilson: Like other Members, I welcome the draft Order. Indeed, we in the Green Party have been pressing for a cap-and-trade scheme for many years, and we welcome the fact that it is finally coming into operation. It will force businesses and public sector organisations in particular to take their energy consumption seriously.

There are many examples of wasted energy. Some of the major culprits are supermarkets. Major supermarkets and high street chains are some of the biggest consumers of electricity, but under the new scheme, they will be obliged to take part in the CRC commitment. As a result, the practice of leaving bright, illuminated signs and window displays switched on through the night will probably end.

The scheme is part of the Government's attempts to improve energy efficiency and to combat climate change to meet the target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 by at least 80% compared with the 1990 baseline. The CRC is an opportunity for large businesses and public sector organisations to play their part in reducing dangerous carbon emissions. For businesses, however, the main motivation to cut energy use will be their bottom line. By cutting energy use, businesses stand to benefit from lower energy bills, and they could be financially rewarded through the CRC if they perform well in energy efficiency because they will then get additional grants.

On the basis of the figures provided, I am not convinced that the proposed reductions will meet the target of a 20% reduction by 2020. I am concerned that the caps may be set too high. We have to monitor how the caps are introduced. Although I welcome the draft Order, it is only the first step. We should expand on it to introduce a cap-and-trade scheme for all greenhouse gases, not just carbon dioxide.

We should learn from the experience of the European Union scheme. The EU introduced a similar scheme but it was largely ineffective because many industries initially reported inflated carbon use and, therefore, did not have to make significant cuts. We have to be sure that the baselines on which we are operating are genuine and that the firms that report their

baselines do not inflate them so that they can lessen their efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

Even if sceptics do not accept the idea that we need to cut our energy consumption because of climate change, there are benefits for industry. Furthermore, as the Minister indicated, the public sector should set an example. I support the motion.

The Minister of the Environment: Once again, I thank the Chairperson and members of the Committee for the Environment for their work and co-operation and for their comments this morning. I will respond to a few of them.

Mr Kinahan talked about not meeting the targets. Based on the 1990-2007 calculations and the existing policy commitments, we are on schedule to meet 22% by 2025, which will fall slightly short of the targets. However, when the strategic energy framework is introduced, we should not only hit our targets but more than achieve them.

Mr Dallat wanted to know what the benefits would be for Northern Ireland, so I did some elementary maths on his behalf. If it is £1 billion across 5,000 companies in the UK, 100 of which are in Northern Ireland, as he indicated in his speech, that equates to a saving of £20 million in Northern Ireland. That might be of benefit to Mr Dallat.

Mr Beggs seemed to be pleased that there is the potential to lock up the business community. I hope that any such resource would be a last resort. We are weak on some of the legislation. However, when I see what is going on, and the individuals who have got away with smuggling waste and laundering fuel, a lot of individuals should be targeted to be put in jail before we think about locking up the business community.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of the Environment: No, not at this moment. If Mr Beggs has made a faux pas, he will just have to live with it.

In essence, there is much that we can do in conjunction with the private sector to ensure that we meet our carbon reduction commitments. The House has many opportunities to press ahead, particularly with regard to energy recovery, whether from waste or other sources, and also to use renewable energy. When I look at people in the world

fighting about oil, gas and other things, and I look around at the energy that exists in Northern Ireland, I wonder what people are fighting about. If people were to apply themselves and harness their activities and efforts to use the energy that exists in Northern Ireland, whether that is wind, wave, tidal, biomass or other energy, we would all have a better future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2010 be approved.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.28 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Committee Business

Report on Inquiry into Public Procurement Policy and Practice in Northern Ireland

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes in which to propose the motion and 15 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 Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on its inquiry into public procurement policy and practice in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My point of order does not concern the Minister of Finance and Personnel; he need not worry. Yesterday, during the debate on the motion on local government reform, Mr Patsy McGlone referred to our party as “provisional Sinn Féin”. Will you consider yesterday’s Hansard report and make a ruling on that next week?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will refer the matter to the Speaker. As a warning to all, all parties should be referred to by their official name.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I welcome the opportunity to open this important debate. Public procurement is a key cross-cutting issue that affects all levels of government. Spending on government supplies, services and construction work forms a significant element of the local economy, accounting for one quarter of the Executive’s annual spend. When combined with local government purchasing, it amounts to upwards of £3 billion each year. Such expenditure represents an important lever that the Executive can use more strategically as a tool for supporting the long-term economic and social

well-being of our community, especially at a time of economic recession when we face a more constrained public expenditure outlook. That is the core message behind the inquiry report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

The Committee recognises the important role that small enterprises play in our economy. Ninety-five per cent of local firms can be characterised as micro-businesses that employ fewer than 10 people, and social economy enterprises are becoming strategic players in delivering important social policy outcomes. That predominance of small enterprises offers tremendous potential for economic growth, and public procurement can provide a suitable vehicle in that regard.

Given the profile of the local business sector, the Committee expects that most public contracts are already awarded to small and microenterprises. However, as highlighted in the report, there are substantial benefits for the public sector and for the wider economy from encouraging new entrants into the public procurement market from the small and microenterprise sector and from enabling local firms to compete for higher-value contracts.

The Committee found a wealth of international evidence on the mutual benefits of the increased involvement of small enterprises in the government supply chain. For the public sector, those benefits include better value for money, business growth and innovation; for the small firms, there is the benefit of access to a large and stable market, which can provide a springboard to achieving growth.

At its meeting on 19 November 2008, the Committee agreed to undertake its inquiry into public procurement on the basis of that rationale and because it had identified concerns and barriers facing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and social enterprises bidding for government contracts.

As I say, public procurement is cross-departmental, a fact recognised in the Programme for Government, which highlights the positive role of procurement in furthering cross-cutting sustainable development and socio-economic objectives. That said, the lead responsibility for taking forward the Executive’s policy direction in that area falls to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). The procurement board, chaired by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and attended by the

permanent secretaries of all Departments, has responsibility for developing overarching public procurement policy across Departments, their agencies and other public bodies. The Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in DFP provides a centralised, professional procurement service to the wider public sector, although it does not formally extend its remit to local government.

In addition to CPD, seven other centres of procurement expertise exist to provide a more integrated service to bodies throughout the public sector. Given the wide remit of procurement across government, the Committee's inquiry report is wide-ranging, with more than 40 evidence-based findings and recommendations. Those apply to the Executive, the procurement board, DFP, CPD and other Departments, where appropriate.

Much of our local procurement policy and practice is informed by legislation and directives that come from the European Union, so the Committee also considered examples of best practice from across Europe. Given the range and scale of public procurement, the Committee chose to focus its inquiry on specific aspects of policy and process, emphasising the end-user experience of SMEs and the social economy sector.

The inquiry's terms of reference also sought to consider the nature, extent and application of social clauses in public contracts and to make recommendations to DFP on improvements to public procurement policies and processes that are aimed at increasing access to opportunities to SMEs and social economy enterprises (SEEs) and maximising the economic and social benefits for the local community. The inquiry was underpinned by a strong evidence base, including written and oral evidence that was supported by a wide-ranging literature review.

A stakeholder conference that was held in October 2009 is also of particular note. It gave all who were involved the opportunity to inform the recommendations that the Committee is publishing today. The conference, which was attended by more than 100 participants, was an innovative approach to gathering evidence and included representations from local SMEs, social enterprises, government purchasers and recognised commentators from other jurisdictions. Focus groups allowed Committee members to hear participants' concerns and suggestions, and interactive digital voting

allowed us to identify instantly the priorities of those in attendance.

The Committee also sought advice and views from leading procurement academics on the outcome of the conference. Along with a full report on the conference, those are included in the appendices of the inquiry report.

The message that came from the conference is clear. The participants wanted a high-level policy direction that is implemented through co-ordinated action by commissioners and buyers. The Committee agrees with that view, and it considers that it is incumbent on the Executive and the Assembly to create a public procurement environment that facilitates smaller enterprises in realising their full potential and which maximises the economic and social impact from expenditure on procurement.

As a result of the inquiry, the Committee identified the need for more balanced application of the 12 principles that govern public procurement here. In particular, more emphasis is needed on the principles of integration and consistency. Indeed, the evidence from the inquiry suggests that, comparatively speaking, local public procurement practice focuses predominantly on compliance and narrow value-for-money considerations. Although those are undoubtedly important, the Committee concluded that procurement practice fails to integrate sufficiently with the Executive's wider economic, social and environmental priorities. In other words, a more strategic and widely defined consideration of value for money is needed. Indeed, the Committee found that the CPD's guidance advises that when the 12 guiding principles have been satisfied to an acceptable level, best value for money can be said to have been achieved.

The Committee's recommendations address the themes that stakeholders raised in their evidence and focus on three main areas. The first of those is improving policy and processes, which includes the use of frameworks and contracts, sourcing opportunities to bid and aspects of tendering and delivering. Secondly, the Committee examined what improvements could be made to procurement policies and practices, with a view to maximising social benefits for the local community. A range of recommendations are made in that area, including a call for the Executive to issue a clear

policy directive on procuring social benefit for targeted use of social clauses and for a model for measuring social value.

The Committee heard evidence about the need to build capacity for purchasers and suppliers in the procurement process. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), which has lead responsibility for the small business and social economy sectors, has a key role to play in that. A number of the Committee's recommendations take that relationship into account, and it is hoped that CPD and DETI can find ways of working together to address those issues.

Finally, the Committee considered a range of other issues, including the opportunity to realise efficiencies through collaborative procurement, issues relating to litigation and public procurement governance arrangements. Although matters relating to local government are not within the Committee's remit, it became apparent during the inquiry that many of the witnesses did not distinguish between local and central government procurement, because their concerns applied across the board.

As a result of the inquiry, the Committee has found that the Executive, in achieving best value for money, can strategically use public procurement as a tool to assist smaller enterprises in realising their full potential and to support longer-term economic and social well-being. I believe that that should and must be done. I look forward to hearing other Members' contributions.

Before I commend the report to the House, I want to make a few points as a private Member. I do not think that most people realise how much money is spent on procurement. Government spend on the supply of services and construction work accounts for one quarter of the Executive's annual spend, and the total amount spent on procurement by central and local government is £3 billion per annum. We also need to consider the issue on an all-island basis, because the total amount spent on procurement across the island is £15.2 billion per annum, which is a large amount of money.

One of the most important ways in which we can influence procurement policy is to ensure that all public spending maximises the wider economic and social benefits of the procurement process for the local community. Public procurement is also an essential part

of the investment strategy. It is important that that opportunity be grasped now more than ever, because it can secure jobs and create new employment opportunities for people. Given the continuing economic recession and the constraints on public spending — we need only consider the debates about the Budget that have been ongoing here — an improved public procurement policy can help us to better spend public money.

The Committee heard about companies that had received contracts because they were able to meet base conditions, such as good wages, good-quality apprenticeships and the employment of the long-term unemployed. That is what the inclusion of social clauses in procurement contracts can provide. We must ensure that such clauses are included at the tendering stage, so that we can deliver fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity for all people. We can effectively challenge existing patterns of social and economic disadvantage if we do that. We can also help to increase prosperity and to combat poverty in areas of disadvantage and need. I hope that the report's recommendations will lead to those changes at policy level and will deliver benefits for everyone in the community, particularly those who are disadvantaged socially and economically.

Mr Hamilton: I support the Committee's report. It is a vast and, in some places, very technical report. I do not know how many pages it runs to, but there are 319 paragraphs in the main report; 142 documents in the appendices; 41 recommendations, as the Chair mentioned; and some 35 written evidence submissions. In future, I am sure that everybody in the Finance Committee will be extremely reticent to indulge any member who starts a sentence: "I think that we should take a wee look at that", because the record will show that that is what happened at the start of this inquiry. Initially, we wanted to take a short, sharp look at procurement, but once we started the process, we realised that there was much more to it than we first thought. Hence, the very detailed paper that is before us today.

At the start of the inquiry, the perception of many Committee members was that there was something wrong with procurement in Northern Ireland, because there had been a number of legal challenges. There has certainly been a lot of litigation in recent times, particularly in respect of framework contracts. That was

taken to be a sign that there was something drastically wrong with procurement in Northern Ireland. There was also a perception that local firms were losing out in tendering for work that was procured by Departments and other aspects of government in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

At the outset, I feared that the inquiry might turn into a bashing of the Northern Ireland procurement system, and I did not think that that would have been justified. One person who gave evidence to the Committee said that Northern Ireland was the market leader in respect of litigation connected with procurement. Equally, however, we heard evidence that although we may sometimes have a few litigation cases here — there was a run of them recently — we are not as bad as other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the minutes of a meeting of a big city council in the north-west of England showed that it had made the decision as to who would get a tender even before the tendering process had opened. Therefore, although people may think that we have problems here, I am sure that everybody agrees that we are not as bad as that council.

I asked the Finance Minister how many CPD-awarded contracts had been given to local companies in the previous financial year. The figure was extremely high; around 90%. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that point. The figure compares very favourably with those in other jurisdictions. In addition, during the inquiry, the Committee received evidence from InterTradeIreland that Northern Ireland-based companies were doing exceptionally well in procuring contracts in the Republic of Ireland. That is one sort of cross-border trade that I am extremely happy to hear is flourishing, and it is one that I encourage.

There is a need to balance the benefit for Northern Ireland companies through procurement with value for money. There is no doubt that £2.4 billion in procurement plus £300 million from local government procurement is a huge prize to be had by local companies. However, that needs to be balanced with value for money, which is particularly pertinent now as we are looking at an even tighter public financial landscape than we were in the past.

I am happy to endorse the report in that it did not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Everybody acknowledges that there have been issues with frameworks. However, I am not against the idea. The approach has merit in building up experience and getting value for money for taxpayers and ratepayers in Northern Ireland. A robust evidence base must be in place before we proceed with frameworks, and that is something that everybody can agree on. I was very keen to push the idea of building capacity so that those who respond to tenders have a greater appreciation of the system and, therefore, would at least know what went wrong and would perhaps not be so disappointed if they did not win a contract. A collaborative approach to procurement, whereby greater efficiencies could be delivered, is also central to the report and something that I endorse.

Maximising social benefit was an issue that I and some Committee members were a little concerned about, although we recognised the benefit that there can be for communities, in particular, deprived communities, in addressing long-term unemployed, getting apprenticeships, and even meeting environmental priorities. However, the approach taken by the report is sensible, and in trying to maximise social benefit, we cannot tip the balance too far. I am always mindful of the evidence given by Paul Davis at the stakeholder conference. Using the example of environmental clauses, he said that if we are too rigid on that, others in the EU may be equally rigid and may rule out some of our companies from applying for contracts.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: There is, I have to say, a much bigger prize of €2,000 billion in procurement potential across the EU.

Mr McNarry: It goes without saying that the power of government spending as a tool of public and economic policy is a key factor in generating a recovery from the economic downturn, and is a means of rebuilding our construction sector, which has been so badly damaged by the slowness of the hitherto booming and buoyant property market.

The mismatch between small and medium-sized enterprises, which are so prevalent across our economy, and the need for comparatively large-scale procurement exercises was a factor about which the Committee for Finance and Personnel was keenly aware, and that came through in the evidence sessions. Access to procurement opportunities for small businesses,

even micro-businesses, is an important way to regenerate our economy and to keep as much public spending as possible in Northern Ireland, benefitting, as a consequence, the jobs market. That is why the re-examination and redesign of public procurement policy is proving so important. It is nothing less than a key building block in our economic recovery. Boosting access to public procurement opportunities for local businesses is a potential driver of economic expansion.

The development of procurement solutions that help to grow small firms by using the wealth, stability and spending power of the public sector to kick-start the private sector, peopled largely by small and medium-sized enterprises, can and will help to create the depth of locally based and locally generated recovery that the private sector badly needs at present. That is why locally based solutions are infinitely preferable, and a public procurement policy is a key building block of that localised solution.

In an age when information systems are so sophisticated and widely available, surely there is no reason why small and medium-sized enterprises should not be able to easily access procurement mechanisms. That is why we also need to open up the procurement process to smaller companies through a re-evaluation of the spread of risk in any contract. It is, therefore, preferable to break big contracts down into a number of smaller contracts that are more easily accessible to smaller companies, both in risk apportionment and in the financing of those contracts.

That also means that we will address the importance of social enterprises and the social economy in Northern Ireland. The social economy should not be underestimated. In a fiscally constrained climate, the services that the social economy provides are invaluable, and we must ensure that it is given every opportunity and the support necessary to develop. I welcome the recommendations in the report that seek to achieve that.

Contractors should also be encouraged to form local consortia to access contracts that would not normally be available to them because of the sheer size and scale of the project involved. We need to learn to do that and to be able to bring that to the table. Thus, we will have a procurement process that can become an engine of recovery for our local economy, and

the Assembly and the Executive can act as the catalyst for economic growth and progress.

I urge the Minister to act on the recommendations in the report. I know that he will give them serious consideration, but I am asking him to go a little bit further. Committees in this place are producing some excellent work that should not be wasted by the Government or by any Department. Therefore, I commend the report.

I also take the opportunity to thank the Committee and the staff involved in putting the report together. It goes without saying that the report was driven by a very keen Chairperson. The Committee will respect all the work that has been done, particularly by her.

Mr O'Loan: I express my complete support for the report and ask the Assembly to endorse it. The report is a major and important piece of work, and I thank the Committee staff who led the process of developing the report so well and who produced an extremely high-quality document that is very important for governance in Northern Ireland. It will not be possible to do justice to such a substantial report in the short time that I have to speak; I will only be able to touch on a few significant points.

As has been said, there are 41 recommendations in the report, and each one is substantial. Taken as a whole, those recommendations have the potential to radically restructure the procurement environment in Northern Ireland. Such restructuring would be to the betterment of public procurement and would be of huge benefit to our small and medium-sized enterprise sector and our social economy sector. I hope that that will happen. I hope that the Minister will respond positively to the report, but it is the implementation phase that will be the important part.

The implications of the recommendations are huge. They fall on the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Central Procurement Directorate in particular. The recommendations also fall on the other seven centres of procurement expertise (COPEs), and there are references to DETI and to other bodies. I have noted those references. Ensuring that the process is a coherent whole that is carried through is an important task that falls to Ministers. I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, whom I see is in the Chamber, will take the lead on that matter.

The potential is huge. The procurement budget for Northern Ireland is £2.4 billion, and the total for the island is £15.2 billion. I note that an interesting point on page 8 of the report refers to the EU approach and contains a significant quotation from an EU document. It outlines a different approach to public procurement, and that is advocated in the report. The EU document says that that approach will:

“result in higher competition for public contracts, leading to better value for money for contracting authorities. In addition to this, more competitive and transparent public procurement practices will allow SMEs to unlock their growth and innovation potential with a positive impact on the European economy.”

I quoted that section because some people say that there is a trade-off here between achieving value for money and getting social benefit. If the process is done right, there will be no such trade-off. The quotation from the EU document and the report's recommendations say that there is enough potential to achieve both outcomes. We can obtain better value for money because the more that we engage with the business sector, the greater the competitive environment that will be created, more businesses will bid and better value for money will result. If we distribute the public procurement budget in the most effective way, the key businesses in the economy will grow. That is not a win-lose scenario; it is definitely a win-win scenario.

I will address some specific issues that are mentioned in the report. The issue of frameworks is of great importance, and Members have already commented on it. I broadly support the line in the report that says that frameworks need to be adjusted. Frameworks must be accessible to the SME sector in a way that they are not currently. That means fundamentally breaking down contracts into lots. I noticed that the report contains a quotation from Sir David Varney that supports that view, and one might not necessarily have expected him to support that line of thinking. He said that we can achieve better value for money and quality:

“by breaking down large contracts, or by linking contractors with sub-contractors”.

In other words, he endorsed my earlier point that we can obtain better value for money and better quality.

The report contains an important section on bidding opportunities, and it mentions the need to make information about those opportunities easily digestible for SMEs.

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

Mr O'Loan: As I said, it is impossible to do proper justice to the report, but I ask the Assembly to give it its full support.

Dr Farry: I and my party fully support the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report. I apologise to the Chairperson for missing the beginning of her speech. However, I warmly welcome the report, which is a substantial and significant piece of work that should have a major impact on policymaking on public procurement in Northern Ireland. I join with others in praising the Committee staff for their very hard work during the considerable number of months in which the Committee examined that area.

Northern Ireland has a large public sector that is a major feature of our economy. Within that, the profile of our companies has a strong presence of small and medium-sized enterprises. Naturally, there is a desire to ensure that, as far as possible, we look after our indigenous businesses. However, at times, the European single market is seen as an impediment or a hassle that we must deal with. It is important to recognise that we should welcome it, because it brings value for money and delivers competition. It is not simply about enabling companies from elsewhere in Europe to come here to compete. It is about companies from Northern Ireland having the aspirations to go elsewhere in the UK and Europe to compete for contracts. Therefore, that should be seen as a two-way process.

We should not adopt a protectionist approach to public procurement. We should have confidence that Northern Ireland companies can compete on a level playing field, and we should encourage them to do so.

2.30 pm

There is a natural desire, as far as is possible, to gear our procurement approach towards meeting the needs of SMEs and to break up contracts. I do not disagree with that. However, I have one small reservation: we should not celebrate the fact that Northern Ireland's profile is overly dominated by small and medium-sized

enterprises. We should encourage businesses to grow and to bulk up. It is only when businesses grow that they are able to compete more effectively outside Northern Ireland for work. Consequently, value for money can be improved. Our economy needs to be more export-oriented rather than simply being one in which local companies feed a local domestic market and that is wary of others coming in to try to compete.

No one would disagree that value for money must be the fundamental starting point in our approach to procurement. That said, my party is more than happy to consider social clauses, whether they relate to environmental sustainability or employment, training and apprenticeships and other such schemes. Public spending is about more than the simple provision of goods, facilities and services. It can be a tool for trying to achieve wider public policy outcomes, and I have no difficulty with that. To some extent, the private sector can take a lead in that by itself, without a push from government, through the concept of corporate social responsibility. There are examples of that already occurring, although it is still at an embryonic stage. There is more that we can do as a government.

However, we need to be conscious of some of the side effects of our approach to public procurement. One side effect could be a situation in which the overall cost of public procurement rises as companies pass the additional costs of complying with social clauses on to the prices that they set when they bid for contracts. We must also ask whether the most effective way to achieve public policy outcomes is through the market playing its role and by companies finding their best way to fulfil social clauses. That may seem to be the most attractive way to do it, but, alternatively, it could be done through a direct spend by government on schemes. That is a much wider debate than the report considers, but it is one that we need to be mindful of, while hoping that the answer is that social clauses are probably a more effective way to achieve the stated objectives. I welcome the report, and I hope that the Minister will embrace it warmly when he makes his remarks.

Mr McQuillan: I apologise for missing the start of the debate.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel's inquiry into public procurement processes

has established the factors that prevent small businesses from applying for government tenders. It is only through the forthcoming changes that we can ensure that a level playing field is established for all those who wish to compete for public sector contracts.

The current economic situation has affected not only the large multinationals but the microbusinesses that make up the majority of our business community. The small business community plays a pivotal role in the development and sustainability of our economy, as it does in the rest of the UK. It is those types of businesses that have experienced most frustration with the procurement system that is used by central government, which has led to a rise in the challenges against the awarding of those contracts and highlights the need for radical change. To allow such businesses to survive and develop, we must ensure, through the changes that we are going to make, that we establish a simple, accessible and transparent procurement process that they can engage in. Such a new process should be applied to all public procurement and not just central government. It should also apply to local government procurement, although that did not form part of the Committee's inquiry.

The development and survival of small businesses can be enhanced and realised if they can apply for tenders and can compete on a more level playing field. Any new process should be up to date and streamlined to avoid duplication of paperwork and the time that has to be spent on gathering information and submitting a tender. Small businesses should be able to utilise their time by applying to a process that avoids duplication of information and that is neither time-consuming nor costly. The cost to the public purse should be eradicated by removing duplication.

Through the introduction of the report's recommendations, we must endeavour to assist businesses that are unable to secure work. They should be given clear guidance to ensure that the most suitable contracts are highlighted for them, thus encouraging the small business to compete. If they are successful in the tender process, payment for any completed work should be made promptly. All contracts awarded following the introduction of the process should be recorded and made accessible and transparent to all to ensure that the process is working correctly.

I add my thanks to the Chairperson and staff of the Committee for their hard work and to the stakeholders who took part in the lengthy inquiry. I support the motion.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I reiterate the thanks to the Committee members, especially the Committee Clerk and the secretariat, for their remarkable work in pulling together all the elements of our inquiry, which lasted a considerable time.

As the report points out, public procurement is an important element of the economy here, with central and local government spending upwards of £3 billion on it annually. Simon Hamilton and Declan O'Loan referred to the spend on the island of Ireland and the British and European markets. There are huge strategic interests for our economy in taking forward the type of procurement policies that would open up the potential and capacity of our local enterprises.

We have acknowledged over and over the predominance of smaller enterprises in the local economy. That issue keeps returning to the Chamber. We are absolutely dependent on them, especially given the paucity of public limited companies and enterprises that operate here. It is not just a dependency; they are an essential element of our economy. Any strategy has to take that reality into account if we want to grow the economy. There is also a growing awareness of the benefits that accrue from social economy enterprises and from operating a commercial business model that can compete in the marketplace but can also deliver social, community and ethical outcomes.

Internationally, the report addresses the fact that benefits can accrue to both the public sector and the wider economy from increasing the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises in the government supply chain. The report also points out the obvious fact that access to a large and stable market provides social economy enterprises with a stronger basis from which they can deliver important social policy outcomes.

In light of the potential benefits, the Committee's report calls on the Executive to develop a strategic policy for using public procurement, as far as is permitted under competition and employment legislation, as a tool to support the development of our smaller enterprises and to stimulate economic growth in the longer term.

The Committee agreed that the implementation of such a policy would require a further cultural change. I agree with Members who said that this was not an exercise in bashing procurement agencies, but the Committee was obliged to draw the conclusion that there were cultural issues that needed to be addressed if innovative and more creative thinking were to be applied to the problem.

The Committee produced a considerable number of recommendations, each of which, I am sure, the Minister has read in the voluminous report. He will have a response to them all. He will be glad to hear that I do not intend to address them all; however, recommendations 8 and 9 go to the core of the issue. They advocate breaking the frameworks down into lots to make it possible to achieve the objective of involving as many of our SMEs as possible in the government supply chain and in providing services and helping to develop the economy. Those important points have already been addressed in the Assembly.

Recommendation 15, which deals with the same broad area, also points to the value of devising mechanisms, particularly through the Central Procurement Directorate, to encourage collaboration between SMEs and to enable them to compete with external competition, which may have an inherent advantage as regards critical mass, and bid for government contracts. As a matter of policy, the Executive should encourage collaboration so that SMEs can form consortia or joint ventures to compete for contracts.

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

Mr McLaughlin: In recommendation 18, the Committee recommended that the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should give careful consideration to the establishment of a public procurement brokerage service to provide the benefit of a one-stop shop to companies that seek to compete.

I could say many other things, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I appreciate that you have indulged me already.

Mr Gallagher: I am happy to have the opportunity to speak about public procurement and will refer specifically to the prospects for business in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. My constituents often tell me that they regard the

public procurement system as a waste of time and money. Having heard that view repeatedly for years, I asked the Finance Minister, in January, to detail the number of contracts that had been awarded to businesses in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That threw up the information that, of more than 1,000 contracts that the Government offered in a two-year period, only eight were awarded to firms in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

As has been said in many Assembly debates, there are many small businesses in the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. They make an important contribution to and provide badly needed jobs in an area that has suffered from economic disadvantage and a lack of investment. The figures that the Minister gave indicated that businesses in my constituency have received a very poor return. Contracts and, in particular, government contracts can go a long way towards helping ailing local economies.

I welcome the Committee's report, because it focuses, in detail, on key issues, and, in compiling it, the Committee enlisted the help of experts from a wide range of interests. The recommendations that are worthy of mention relate to the perception that the procurement process favours larger companies and businesses at the expense of smaller businesses.

I am encouraged by some of the report's conclusions and recommendations, particularly those relating to the way that larger procurement contracts can legitimately be broken down into smaller lots that can then be put out to tender. The report informs us that that practice is followed in many other countries and that it is approved by the European code of best practice. We can learn lessons from that.

The other matter that merits attention is the possibility of having a procurement website. The Department should establish a designated website, on which it should list all the contracts as soon as it is in a position to do so. The contracts would, therefore, be there for all businesses to see. It was interesting to read the surveys that were carried out by the Federation of Small Businesses and the construction industry. They showed that about 50% of firms across the business sector knew nothing about the procurement process. That demonstrates the value of education, and I hope that the

Department will take that on board. I would like there to be a dedicated website.

I represent a border constituency. Some companies that are based in Fermanagh tell me that they can gain contracts in the Republic of Ireland, because they have done so previously.

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

Mr Gallagher: An all-island website would benefit firms that are based in the border areas.

2.45 pm

Mr F McCann: A LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde, ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion. Over the past number of months, nobody in the Committee for Finance and Personnel could have failed to pick up valuable lessons from the wide range of people who presented evidence to the Committee. It was a learning curve for me, and I drew much from the verbal presentations and many of the written responses that we received. I picked up a great deal from a cross-section of Committee members. I thank the Committee Clerks, who assisted us in our quest to find a better approach to delivering procurement, and Research Services, whose papers contained a mound of information.

We have all been made acutely aware of the huge impact that government spending on the procurement of services has had on the economy. It is also evident that we must ensure that a wider range of people in the business community have an equal opportunity to tap into that resource. Prior to the exercise, the general opinion was that, in procurement, big was beautiful. However that missed the point that the majority of businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises.

It also emerged that the microbusinesses that employ fewer than 10 people felt totally excluded from the procurement system. That highlights the necessity to adopt a different approach to ensure that the whole business community can operate on a level playing field. Time and again, we heard stories about people being discouraged from applying for contracts because of the bureaucracy involved or because they believed that the system was skewed in favour of larger companies with the capacity to manage the application system.

The Committee inquiry and the follow-up conference laid out many challenges for the Assembly and businesses alike. If the report is accepted, I hope that it will go a long way to delivering the changes that are required to deal with the sizeable problems in the procurement set-up.

The report highlights the fact that, in 2008-09, almost £2.4 billion was spent on the delivery of supplies and services and delivering contracts to the construction industry, which guaranteed the preservation of jobs across the North. I once heard it said that more than 2,000 small and micro businesses existed in west Belfast. If each could be encouraged to employ one or two additional people, the unemployment in that part of the city would be greatly reduced. Imagine what would happen if we could encourage those small businesses to tap into the procurement system.

Community enterprises find it impossible to get near the current procurement system. If that system were simplified, think of the impact that those community enterprises could have on localised employment and the delivery of services. Bryson Charitable Group is a community enterprise that is also an environmental employer. It delivers hundreds of jobs with a focus on recycling and other environmentally friendly programmes, including the warm homes scheme.

The report states that local commissioners and purchasers seemed reluctant to pursue social benefit through procurement. It also points to a need for greater clarity on the Executive's intention for procurement policy and on the definition and measurement of social value.

I recently spoke to several party colleagues who have brought staff from the Department's procurement section to their constituencies to meet local businesspeople to explain to them the best way to get on to the procurement ladder. For many who attended, it was the first time that anyone from a Department had been in their area. Roadshows should be organised throughout the North. Yesterday, the Minister of Finance and Personnel spoke about freezing rates and about the need for Departments to go into local areas to ensure that people have the information that they require to interface with whatever service the Government provide. The procurement gathering proved to be a huge success.

In Committee, I raised several problems faced by local builders who provide a building and design process not only for social housing providers but for a wide range of clients. That type of procurement process was challenged in the European courts, and a directive instructed that such procedures cease. I have since learned that the same procurement process was in operation in some English councils. When I asked why that was the case, I was told that those councils had adopted a more flexible approach to the European ruling, whereas staff in the Department of Finance and Personnel had adopted a policy that stuck strictly to the letter of the ruling.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Mr Paul Butler.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Butler): Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was engrossed in conversation.

Mr McLaughlin: He was talking about the report.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment : That is right; I was obviously talking about the report.

I would like to speak on behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I welcome the report, which contains five recommendations on the responsibilities of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Committee on public procurement. On a number of occasions, the Committee heard about the difficulties that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the social economy sector face when tendering for public procurement contracts. Committee members are well aware of the issues, and, therefore, they will very much welcome the report's findings and recommendations, particularly those that relate to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Indigenous SMEs are the lifeblood of the local economy, so it is vital that such businesses be given every opportunity to tender on an equal footing to provide the products and services that public sector organisations need to meet their objectives. In particular, the social economy here continues to grow, and it is very important to our economy. If accepted and implemented, the report's recommendations will increase opportunities for the social economy sector and help to sustain and grow the number of jobs in that sector.

A number of recommendations consider how the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Finance and Personnel might work together. I am sure that, as the lead Departments for the SME sector and the social economy sector, DETI will work with DFP to consider and implement the report's recommendations as effectively as possible and to the benefit of both sectors.

The report calls for the procurement board, in conjunction with DETI, to consider refining the definition of "small and medium-sized enterprise". The Committee's inquiry defined a small and medium-sized enterprise as an organisation with fewer than 250 employees. By local standards, any organisation with more than 100 employees is considered to be quite large. However, if we decide to change how we define the SME sector, we must be careful to ensure that any new definition remains compatible with the definition of an SME in Britain, the South and Europe.

The report also calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to liaise with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that sufficient funding is in place for measures to build the capacity of small enterprises to access public sector supply chains. At present, many SMEs, including those in the social economy sector, face considerable difficulties, not least of which is the problem of attracting finance from banks. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has engaged with banks to help to improve the situation for small businesses so that they can get loans, particularly through the enterprise finance guarantee scheme.

The Committee has endorsed DETI's social economy enterprise strategy only if that is subject to the inclusion of financial commitments to secure its full implementation. The Committee will, therefore, welcome any constructive action to provide financial support for SMEs and social economy enterprises to build capacity.

As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I welcome the report's recommendations relating to social clauses, particularly those that put a commitment on businesses to have apprenticeship quotas, given the difficulties in the present economic climate. Members may recall that the Minister for Employment and Learning was asked about

programme-led apprenticeships during Question Time yesterday.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment welcomes the report overall. We hope that the Minister listens and implements its recommendations. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time is at 3.00 pm, I ask Members to take their ease for a couple of minutes. When we return to the debate, the next person to speak will be the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): Mr Deputy Speaker, may I make my contribution to the debate after Question Time and before the Minister responds?

Mr Deputy Speaker: My point was that we are moving towards Question Time. You have two or three minutes to speak now.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: I will do my best. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will comment on behalf of the Committee for the Environment. The Committee discussed the procurement methods used by local government. In response to a request for more details about the process used by local government to award contracts, the Department indicated that a range of methods is employed. First, a business case is developed and approved at the appropriate level, which is dependant on the value of the contract. Then, the Department develops terms of reference, which are sent to Central Procurement Directorate for a decision on whether framework agreements, call-off contracts or open competition are appropriate. At that stage, an evaluation panel is formed which, in conjunction with CPD, decides which methods will achieve best value for money.

The Department told the Committee that CPD provides assistance and guidance to local government procurement division at all stages during the process. The methodology and cost criteria defined by the evaluation panel are key to the decision-making process. The Department also provided the procurement thresholds for all public procurement along with a note that ministerial approval would be sought for any procurement exceeding £75,000.

Although that response provided the Committee with a factual account of the procedures that

take place, members were quick to realise that it did not tell us how the more subjective decisions are made. The Committee is concerned that it appears that the same large firms are selected regularly while newer and/or smaller firms appear to be less successful. The Committee wrote back to the Department to ask for more insight into that. We also relayed our concerns to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which was undertaking the review.

Subsequently, the Department explained that an evaluation panel assesses the extent to which each organisation tendering meets qualitative criteria and awards scores accordingly. That includes the panel's consideration of whether the organisation has the capacity, experience and knowledge to complete the assignment successfully and will provide value for money for the taxpayer. The Department also suggested that, in the consideration of the latter, a company's size might affect the result because, if the assignment is large and complex, smaller organisations with limited resources may not have the requisite capacity and experience to deliver the project. That appears to be at the heart of the procurement problem from the Environment Committee's perspective. I urge central and local government to recognise the contribution that smaller and less experienced contractors can make and, where possible, within the guidelines, give them opportunities to develop and grow.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended that there be greater synergy between central and local government purchasing policy and practice, with a view to achieving consistency in the application of good practice procurement across the public sector. Although I am unable to comment on behalf of the Committee on the precise model that may be adopted to achieve that, it is an admirable and sensible aspiration and one that could, and should, be used to help to address the problems that I have outlined.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism: Targets

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will achieve its current target of 2.5 million tourists per year by 2011. (AQO 820/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): The target represents a formidable challenge, and its achievement has been made more difficult by the economic circumstances that we face, which are impacting on tourism globally. However, the most up-to-date figures for 2009 show an encouraging 31% increase in visitors from the Republic of Ireland, but a 15% drop in visitors from Great Britain has resulted in an overall decline of 14% in respect of all our out-of-state visitors.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) continues to build on the success of its recent marketing campaigns in the Republic of Ireland, and, in parallel, Tourism Ireland has undertaken a review of its activities in the Great Britain market. It recently announced a series of major initiatives to achieve a 4% increase in visitors in 2010. Our aim is that those efforts will lead to a turnaround in the overall downward trend. However, the target for visitors in the Programme for Government is extremely challenging in the current climate.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her answer. The public service agreement for tourism numbers and tourism revenue was rated as red in the most recent monitoring round. The draft tourism strategy, which will take us up to 2020, anticipates that visitor numbers will increase to 4.5 million. How will that bullish target be achieved?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The bullish target, as the Member describes it, will be achieved by Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board working together in an effective way. I was pleased to

be at the recent launch of Tourism Ireland's Great Britain strategy, in which it identified Great Britain as a key market for us. As part of that, Tourism Ireland is using ten strategies to attract visitors from Great Britain to events in Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland hopes to increase visitor numbers by 4%. That is a challenging target, but one that not only Tourism Ireland and the Tourist Board but the industry are up for meeting. That is the key, because the industry must be up for meeting that target. Members should be encouraged by the confidence that the industry has in Northern Ireland as a place to visit.

Mr McQuillan: I think the Minister for her answer. What effect will the cancellation of the Northern Ireland air show have on those figures? What can the Northern Ireland Tourist Board do to offset those effects?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: We were disappointed that one of the biggest tourism events on the north coast — the international air show, which, as the Member will know, is held annually in Portrush — has, this year, fallen victim to the economic downturn. I appreciate that officials in Coleraine Borough Council did not make the decision lightly. In fact, I am sure that the opposite applied. However, the decision was based on a decrease in other available sponsorship for the event. I hope that the council will be able to put on the show in 2011. In the meantime, I will be asking my colleagues in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), and any other Department and agency that can help, to consider what support and advice they can offer.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her continued interest in tourism. Like Adrian McQuillan, I have an interest in the north coast, where, as it has been said, a major event has been cancelled. Is the Minister satisfied that the strategies are sufficiently broad to encompass all aspects of tourism and that we will not be left to depend on a few events that may, from time to time, founder?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It was unfortunate that the economic downturn meant that there was an inability to attract the sponsorship that would have made the air show possible. Last year, the international air show was awarded £18,000 from DCAL, not from the Northern Ireland Events Company. That is why I said that I will be asking other Departments whether there

is anything that we can do to help Coleraine Borough Council. The air show is an absolutely marvellous event and it is one of the key attractions on the north coast. Therefore, we are loath to see it not happen this year. However, as I said, we will do all that we can to assist its organisers.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the north coast has a key part to play in the aim of attracting 2.5 million tourists? Does she also agree that NITB has not helped that process by recently leaving Moyle District Council off the north coast council invitation list for a key engagement with the chief executive of NITB? That move has not gone down well locally, to say the very least. Does the Minister agree that the NITB chief executive should hold a similar engagement exercise with Moyle District Council to help to compensate for that snub?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I share the Member's disappointment that Moyle District Council was not invited to that event. I have spoken to the Tourist Board about that, and I think that it was the wrong thing to do. I was told that it was not meant in any way as a snub, but that the Tourist Board was dealing with a lot of industry people and felt that it had good representation from Moyle. That is not an excuse as far as I am concerned. As I said, I have spoken to the Tourist Board about that and I will certainly pass on the Member's comments about Moyle District Council having a meeting with the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Developing the north coast is a key part of what we are trying to do for Northern Ireland. It is one of our big signature projects. I know that Moyle District Council is very closely associated with the signature project on the Causeway Coast. Therefore, I find it difficult to understand why Moyle District Council was not invited on that occasion. However, the matter has been taken up and I assure the Member, and all Members who represent North Antrim, that it will not happen again.

Cultural Tourism

2. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans her Department has to increase cultural tourism given the benefits and attraction of the rich vein of Irish history, culture and tradition. (AQO 821/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The appeal of history, culture and tradition to our visitors is recognised by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and is integrated, when relevant, into its product marketing and development plans. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is working closely with the Arts Council to support the traditional arts, when appropriate, to benefit tourism. The ongoing development of genealogy and roots tourism and the promotion of indigenous craft and food will also highlight traditional activity and history in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board recently launched a 'Great Days Out for Groups' guide to over 400 local group travel organisers and coach operators at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra. Containing over 100 themed itineraries, the guide will assist the industry in the delivery of visitor experiences that are rich in all aspects of history, culture and tradition that are unique to Northern Ireland.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister accept that many will be disappointed with that rather tick-box answer that referred to some events, in that there was no reference whatsoever to the value of music, story, dance, questions of historical interest pre-plantation, the European context of struggles, and the whole areas of the United Irishmen or the famine? There is massive potential out there that indigenous and international tourists want to avail themselves of, and they experience something completely different in the Twenty-six counties as opposed to the North.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should come to a question.

Mr Leonard: Therefore, does the Minister accept that we may need to work with vigour on that issue, rather than with lethargy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I assure the Member that I will be working with vigour. I have asked my Department to set up a group that looks at 2012 as a very significant year for Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to the Titanic signature project and the Giant's Causeway visitor centre, which will be built and open by then. That work will also look in particular at cultural tourism in respect of the Ulster Covenant, which was signed in 1912. That was a hugely significant event for Northern Ireland, and one that we believe should be celebrated. That will link us to many other cities on the mainland, such as Liverpool,

London, Manchester and Bristol, which are all areas that signed the Ulster Covenant. That will give us great linkages. I very much look forward to 2012 because it will be a key year for us, and I hope that everybody in the House will work to maximise that opportunity.

Mr McNarry: What additional plans does the Minister have for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to embrace the Orange tradition as a spectacular tourism attraction throughout all parts of Northern Ireland, which celebrates the triumph of democracy in Europe? I am sure that the Member who asked the substantive question might be interested in that.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Recently, I had the opportunity to speak to members from the Whitehouse in Carrickfergus about the significance of the Whitehouse, the landing of King William at Carrickfergus and the Williamite trail, of which the Northern Ireland Tourism Board is aware. The Tourist Board has been working closely with the Orange Order to develop the Williamite trail and the tourism flagship concept where four or five parades are selected annually based on their tourism appeal. We will continue to do that.

The Member may be aware that two of the staff at Orange Order headquarters took part in the Welcome All training last year. I welcome that training, as it means that they are now in-house welcome host trainers and they can help to train up others in the Orange Institution with regard to the tourism potential of the parades and cultures. I hope that the Member will acknowledge that there is a lot going on with regard to Orange Order projects in the Tourist Board and in Tourism Ireland, and it is something that I will continue to encourage.

Mr T Clarke: I am pleased that the Minister referred to the centenary of the Ulster Covenant in 2012. I am sure that the Member opposite, who was once a member of the Orange Order, is equally pleased. Will the Minister expand on some of the projects that she has planned in relation to the signing of the Ulster Covenant?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am setting up a group in the Department to make the most of 2012, not least because the Olympic Games will be happening in London and we want to make the most of the international visitors who will be coming to the United Kingdom at that time. We also need to make the most of 2013, which, as

the Member will be aware, is the four hundredth anniversary of the creation of the walls in the city of Londonderry. A great amount of history and tourism is coming together. It is an exciting time for tourism in Northern Ireland, and it should be celebrated throughout the community.

Dr Farry: I am not going to make a comment from any sectional point of view. Given the different histories and cultures — and, indeed, the shared history and cultures — of Northern Ireland and bearing in mind those strengths, will the Minister comment on where she sees tourism lying with regard to Northern Ireland's competitive advantage and the economy internationally? As well as looking at visitor numbers, does she see the profile of tourism in our gross value added (GVA) changing over the years?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I do, absolutely. I believe that tourism has the capacity to be one of the key economic drivers for Northern Ireland, and I have made that point often. Therefore, I believe that we can increase the amount of our GVA coming from tourism. I agree that it will give us a competitive edge. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's spring campaign is all about exploring more and finding out the stories that people may not already know about in Northern Ireland, and looking at parts of our culture and heritage, our history, and our genealogy, which is also linked to the Ulster Covenant for those who may want to look back to see whether members of their families signed the Ulster Covenant. I plan to talk to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure about the links with Canada. There is a huge amount that we can do to give us that competitive edge, which could then be linked to tourism and investment. If we can link some businessmen to their roots in Northern Ireland, the door will be open for us.

Tourism: Strangford

3. Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to develop the tourism product in the Strangford constituency. (AQO 822/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board promotes key attractions and tourism services in the Strangford area through various marketing activities and media. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board provided a grant of over £200,000 for an observatory at the nineteenth century disused limekilns at Castle Espie. The St Patrick

trail runs alongside Strangford Lough, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is extending the Mourne coastal route along the outside of the peninsula. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board recently launched a Great Days Out for Groups initiative to over 400 local group travel organisers and coach operators at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Of the 100 themed itineraries, seven are based in and around the Strangford constituency.

The tourism strategy for Northern Ireland identifies Strangford as one of nine key tourist destinations for development over the next 10 years.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It is good to see all the Members for Strangford in the House.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board issued a letter of offer to Exploris, the Northern Ireland Aquarium, for £21,000 towards a feasibility study to investigate options for a major otter exhibit to complement the existing seal sanctuary, which is a year-round visitor attraction.

Finally, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's chief executive met Ards Borough Council to discuss the development of tourism in Strangford.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer. As Strangford Lough is a confirmed destination management area in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's strategy, will she confirm that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will commit to a resource plan that is supported by councils and private sector partners for what is, as the Minister has indicated, one of only a small number of tourism key growth areas over the next 10 years?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I say again to the Member that my Department really values the contribution that Strangford Lough makes to our tourism offering in Northern Ireland. Sometimes it is seen only as an environmental gift. However, it has a huge impact on tourism as well.

The Member will know that development work on the tourism strategy has been completed. The draft strategy and accompanying action plan were presented to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on 4 February. The Committee raised no major issues, and it has

agreed to await the outcome of the consultation, after which it will look again at the strategy.

The tourism strategy will go out for consultation for a 12-week period, and, therefore, it would be premature of me to comment on the specific issues that the Member asked about. However, Strangford is very much on the agenda for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland as we seek to promote Northern Ireland across the world.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her positive responses so far. She has already acknowledged the excellent tourist facility at Portaferry, namely, Exploris, the Northern Ireland Aquarium. That premier facility has been managed by the premier Ards Borough Council —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr McCarthy: When will the Minister get behind the local council and contribute financially to the future and expansion of that wonderful facility in Portaferry?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not sure whether the Member heard what I said about Exploris, but my Department is putting £21,000 towards a feasibility study to investigate options for a major otter exhibition. To my mind, although the Member may correct me, that is the first time that that has been done for Exploris. The Member has a keen interest in Exploris, as do I. It is a tremendous facility in Portaferry, and I am keen to see it expand, but that must be done in a sustainable manner, as I am sure the Member will recognise. That is why a feasibility study on the otter exhibit is being carried out.

Mr Beggs: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board works closely with local councils, assisting them to develop and to market plans to improve the tourism product. In light of the review of public administration (RPA), does the Northern Ireland Tourist Board plan to adapt its structure to mould it to the proposals that are coming forward, whether they apply to Strangford or to my constituency of East Antrim, which is the gateway to the Antrim coast and glens?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I always enjoy the advertisements that emerge when we talk about the tourism product, and today is no different.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is a unitary body, and, therefore, it will continue to work with councils whether there are 26 or 11 of them. I am keen that we add more value to the tourism work of our councils, so that we can get the maximum out of our tourism offering at local level. However, there are areas, not least in the Member's constituency, where the tourism offering may not sit neatly within council boundaries, either at present or when the RPA takes place. It is important that councils continue to work not only with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland but with each other to get the maximum out of some of the gems that we have throughout Northern Ireland. I am thinking of a number of areas, including the Sperrins, the Mourne and the Member's area, where cross-council working must continue when the number of councils reduces from 26 to 11.

Titanic Signature Project

4. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department is taking to ensure that local construction and engineering companies benefit from work generated as a result of the Titanic signature project. (AQO 823/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The delivery of the Titanic signature building is the responsibility of the Titanic Foundation Ltd, which is an independent charitable company. It has contracted in accordance with public procurement rules with Harcourt Construction (Northern Ireland) Ltd for the design and build of the signature building. The award of subcontracts under the main contract, which sit outside the public procurement rules, is a matter for Harcourt Construction. However, it has given a commitment to Titanic Foundation Ltd and the Construction Employers Federation to advertise subcontract packages through various media to enable local firms to participate in the delivery of the Titanic signature building.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree with me that many Northern Ireland firms have been involved in major projects, including work that was carried out at St Pancras station in London, which EDM Spanwall was involved in? Will she try to ensure as much as possible that such Northern Ireland firms are included in any project within the Titanic Quarter given their expertise in the field?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: As I indicated in my answer to the substantive question, Harcourt is not under any obligation to go through a public procurement exercise. However, reflecting the concerns of local representatives, and input from myself, it has agreed that it will continue to be as open and transparent as possible. I hope to visit EDM Spanwall at the invitation of the Member in the near future. I also understand that Harcourt has facilitated a meeting between EDM Spanwall and the successful bidder, obviously without any prejudice to the outcome of that meeting.

It is important that we are as open and transparent as we possibly can be on such matters. Given the large amount of public money that has been put into the Titanic Quarter, it is important that our firms not only can, but believe that they can, become part of what is going on there. I know that that is the subject of a debate at the moment, but it is important that small firms can access those big contracts so that they can be part of what is going on in the Titanic Quarter.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answer, which encourages me somewhat. However, I would be further encouraged if the design and specification of contracts was such that small and medium-sized enterprises could successfully compete for those subcontracts. The Minister will be aware of the recent closures in east Belfast, in particular, that of the Hughes Christensen factory.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr A Maginness: In conclusion, I ask the Minister to be sensitive to and cognisant of that workforce, which is out of work but has extraordinary engineering capacity.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am fully aware of the engineering capacity of Hughes Christensen — or Baker Hughes — and its employees. That is something that I will continue to keep an eye on, because I believe that our firms here in Northern Ireland should have the opportunity to apply for big contracts wherever they may be, but, obviously, I have particular interest in the Titanic Quarter, given the amount of public money that has been made available. If people bring me evidence or ask me questions about the Titanic Quarter, I am more than happy to speak to Titanic Foundation Ltd and Harcourt directly to ensure

that local people have the opportunity not only to gain employment but to have access to the subcontract work.

Part of the memorandum of understanding that was drawn up, with which Belfast City Council was involved, because of the money that it put into the Titanic signature project, includes various clauses about social, economic and environmental issues. One of those is to encourage the economically inactive back into the workplace, and Harcourt has agreed to secure the creation of employment opportunities for one long-term unemployed person — defined as someone who has been unemployed for at least three months — either directly or through the supply chain for each £5 million of the project value.

Therefore, those social and economic clauses are included in the memorandum of understanding. It is important that those are complied with, and we must ensure that they are.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's comments in her answers. Will she go further and ensure that any contracts, secured through public procurement tenders by companies involved in work such as the Titanic signature project and other public works through the Department, will be evaluated not only on value for money but on social and environmental outcomes, particularly in areas of disadvantage and need?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: They are evaluated on that basis, and that is what today's debate on public procurement is about. I am not in charge of public procurement, which is a matter for the Minister of Finance and Personnel, but I have a particular issue with the contract for the Titanic signature project because of the public money that came out of DETI for it. I take the Member's points on board. That is why social and economic clauses are reflected in that memorandum of understanding. Harcourt won the public procurement competition, and, therefore, it has gone through the public procurement set of rules. It is important that subcontractors continue to have as open and transparent a process as possible so that they can help to build what will be, I hope, an iconic signature building.

Credit Unions

5. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what extra support and guidance her Department can offer to credit unions. (AQO 824/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In addition to the necessary legislative changes, the steering group, which comprises representation from DETI, Her Majesty's Treasury and the Financial Services Authority (FSA), will consider how best to take forward the non-legislative recommendations in the report by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Those recommendations include the Financial Services Authority to consider a local Northern Ireland presence; DETI and the Financial Services Authority to work with the credit union movement to develop and implement training programmes; Her Majesty's Treasury to consider a package of financial support to assist credit unions in implementing changes; and the extension of schemes that operate in Great Britain, such the growth fund, to include Northern Ireland credit unions. The steering group will work closely with the Northern Ireland credit union movement during the transition period to ensure a smooth transfer of regulatory responsibility to the Financial Services Authority.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the credit unions in Northern Ireland should be able to provide a much greater level of service to the public that is similar to that of their counterparts in Britain and the Republic of Ireland? Does she agree that the necessary legal and industrial framework should be put in place to enable that to happen? Will she indicate the steps that need to be taken to make that happen and the likely timescales for that? Credit unions here have done and continue to do a tremendous job, and we should not sit in this place and not empower them to do an even better job.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I wholeheartedly agree with the Member. Last year, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment produced a useful piece of work as a result of its investigation into credit unions in Northern Ireland. I largely endorsed the Committee's report so that legislation could be introduced that would enable credit unions in Northern Ireland

to have the same amount of powers that they have in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

I have had the opportunity to discuss with the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee the fact that a number of pieces of legislation have to be enacted at Westminster and in the Assembly in addition to the administrative arrangements that require to be put in place before credit unions can come under the regulatory responsibility of the Financial Services Authority. The FSA has been asked to estimate how long that will take, and it has indicated that it will require up to 18 months following the laying of the initial legislation before it will be in a position to assume regulatory duties from DETI. Therefore, it is anticipated that it will be the latter part of 2011 before all the legislation has been put in place and all the work by the Financial Services Authority has been carried out.

I know that some Members will be hugely disappointed by that timescale, and I cannot say that I am terribly excited about it either. I have asked for a meeting with the Treasury on it, and I hope that that meeting will take place in the near future.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Report on Inquiry into Public Procurement Policy and Practice in Northern Ireland

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on its inquiry into public procurement policy and practice in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein. — [The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann).]

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I made it here just in time, although I am breathless. First, I wish to thank — *[Interruption.]*

No, I am not smoking. I will leave that to you.

I welcome the report that has been discussed here today, and I thank the Committee for the work that it has done. I have a copy of the report. I have read its recommendations and have received a briefing on them.

Like other Members, I wish to emphasise that we spend £2.4 billion on procurement. Two important points about public procurement must be remembered. First, we must get value for money. Secondly, we must comply with the regulations, because procurement is an area of government that is heavily regulated at EU level. That point is not in my departmental notes — it is my view. I do not share Mr Farry's view that we should not be concerned about those regulations. Unfortunately, the regulations are prescriptive and give rise to restrictions that many of us in the House would prefer did not exist, because we would like to give much more preference to local industry. Nevertheless, we must live with those restrictions as they are part of the internal market. The problem is that there is a large amount of case law, new directives are coming out all the time and the EU Commission is making decisions, and, in that situation, we must be careful that we comply.

Mr F McCann: I appreciate that we must abide by the rules and regulations, but we have heard

reports that other jurisdictions offer greater flexibility on certain types of public procurement than is offered here.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Where it is clear that flexibility has been experienced and is working in other jurisdictions, we should seek to learn from that, and all Ministers should be looking at that. I noticed that the report does not say a great deal about the ways in which such flexibility might be shown. However, if other parts of Europe can show a degree of flexibility, we should seek to do that, too. If the political will exists to do that, it would be an advantageous and worthwhile exercise.

A number of Members, including the Chairperson of the Committee and Mr McNarry and Mr O'Loan, asked about the implementation of the report. I wish to make three points about that. First, I am not passing the buck, but it is not solely my responsibility to implement the report. Those Members who have read the report will be aware that it impacts on other Departments. Secondly, regardless of whether I agree, we must have cognisance of the legal requirements that exist, and it may not be possible to implement some of the recommendations if doing so would run against those legal requirements. Thirdly, there will be some points on which there is a difference of emphasis or even a difference of view on the way forward. That may come through in my contribution. The least that I can do is to be honest about where those differences lie.

The report has a number of themes, most of which have come through in the debate, including the socio-economic objectives that we should be setting in procurement policy, the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises, and the social economy. I think that almost every Member who spoke during the debate asked what we can do for small and medium-sized enterprises to ensure that they get their fair share in the procurement process, whether that be in specific areas, such as Fermanagh and south Tyrone, or across the economy. Although we recognise the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises, I share Mr Farry's view that the procurement process should help to encourage small businesses to grow into larger businesses, so that they can become more competitive and look to wider markets.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I would, but I am fairly pushed for time.

We need to take note of the reality, not the perception. The information that I have been given is that 78% of the contracts that CPD awarded between 2006 and 2009 went to small and medium-sized enterprises with local addresses, and in the construction industry that figure was 90%. Therefore, it is wrong to say that local businesses are not getting a fair share.

A number of Members asked what measures have been, or could be, taken to help small businesses. Some measures are already in place. For example, through the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland (CIFNI), we have set up arrangements to help small and medium-sized enterprises in the construction industry. Through those arrangements, proportionate minimum standards for experience and financial standing are set for firms. We accommodate applications from consortia so that small firms can join together to gain the strength and width of experience that being involved in such bodies brings. The pre-qualification process has also been standardised and streamlined, but I will say more about that in a moment. We are examining how the assessment of contractors' health and safety competence can be evaluated more efficiently as part of the procurement process. Again, that is being done to help small businesses.

When it comes to services, we have looked at a number of key sector groups, including those that are involved in advertising and ICT, as well as consultancy groups and legal services. The object of those groups is to assist small firms to build capacity so that they can compete for future projects and applications. We have worked with Invest Northern Ireland to improve the way in which small businesses can build capacity.

E-sourcing has been important in getting firms on the register. There are 5,400 registered vendor/suppliers with local addresses on the portal, and, of those, 4,000 have classified themselves as small and medium-sized enterprises and 100 have classified themselves as social economy enterprises. Details of all businesses that are on the register are available for those seeking to supply contracts.

Mr McNarry and others asked whether procurement could be broken down into smaller contracts. Where possible, we have

already done that. For example, office cleaning contracts are fragmented into geographical areas to give firms a better chance to compete. Other Members asked whether contracts could be broken down into smaller lots. That happens with construction contracts. For example, there are measured-term contracts for minor civil engineering works. The Province has been split into six areas, and that enables SMEs to apply for one or more contracts.

Mr McCann raised the very important issue of information. A number of meetings have been held across the Province, and, as I look through the list, I see that Sinn Féin was responsible for organising a number of those. This is not something that I do very often, but I congratulate Sinn Féin for taking that initiative. Larne Borough Council and Larne Enterprise Development Company Ltd, which is in one of the business parks in the area, organised two meetings that were held in my area. Over 15,000 small firms have attended the meetings that have been held across the Province in the past two years. More meetings are being organised, and that is another way of helping small businesses. We have also sought to make the pre-qualification process less burdensome.

Frameworks have benefits in that they allow for speed and create economies of scale. I know that that is the case. For example, at the end of July, Whitehouse Primary School, which is in my constituency, burned down. The school reopened in the annex of another school's premises, with the requisite Portakabins, on 1 September 2009. I visited the school on the day of the fire, and I walked into the school on the first day of the following term. As a result of the framework arrangements, we were able to organise contractors very quickly. Therefore, there is a speed benefit to frameworks.

Another benefit is the reduction in tendering costs, because not every job has to be tendered for. I have gone round a lot of the firms. I went to a school that was being built in Banbridge, and I spoke to a representative of a firm involved who said that it had four contracts and, as a result, had been able to build up work with subcontractors for flooring, electrical work, equipment and everything else. That was only possible because the firm could offer continuity of work, which enabled it to invest and to make decisions about investment in capital and skills, etc. Therefore, there are benefits.

I recognise that there are times when frameworks may not be the best way forward, and CPD already considers alternative forms of contract in key areas where, after consultation with the relevant sectoral groups, we decide that frameworks are not the best way forward. I have already mentioned some of those areas. However, 60% of the successful supplier teams in framework agreements are SMEs, so the frameworks do not necessarily cut them out.

We are open to looking at how we can vary the frameworks arrangements, but we should not forget their value for money, their speed, their economies of scale and their benefit to firms, which are able to plan ahead once they are in the frameworks. However, where it is not appropriate, we will not go down the framework route.

The last point that Members raised was the social impact of procurement, which is very important. We have already sought to take cognisance of some of the points that have been made. If one looks at how we award construction contracts, part of the requirement is that there is a minimum of one apprentice employed for each £2 million of capital value in the contract and one long-term unemployed person for every £5 million. So, we already try to build in requirements. People may say that that is not enough and that there are other things that can be done, but I must emphasise that we try to recognise the value of the public money that goes into contracts. We ask what we can extract for the social good from the money that is spent.

The procurement board produced guidance in 2008 on equality and sustainability. We are assessing the effectiveness of that guidance, and we will continue to do so this year in light of the report. Sustainable procurement will form part of the revised COPE assessment model, which will be submitted to the procurement board for approval in due course. Therefore, there is ongoing work being done in that area.

Those are the general themes from the debate. I did not mention all the individual Members who raised those themes. We cannot be complacent about procurement. I thank the Committee for the report. Some Members mentioned the disquiet that exists and the legal challenges that have been mounted. One should be careful not to deviate from guidance, because some of the firms that tell me that they would like me to

be more flexible are the very firms that would have me in court if they did not get a particular contract.

The report is balanced and has not just been a bashing exercise, and I congratulate the Committee on that. There are lessons to be learned from the report. I cannot promise that every one of the recommendations will be adopted for the reasons that I gave earlier, but I will encourage Ministers to look at the relevance of the report to their Departments and to apply the lessons from it as best they can.

3.45 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee

for Finance and Personnel (Mr Weir): Today's debate on the Committee's report on its inquiry into public procurement policy and practice in Northern Ireland has been useful. I thank the Minister and the many Members who spoke for their contributions.

I was slightly worried when I looked around the Chamber at the beginning of the debate. Although the Chairperson, some other Committee members and I were in our places, a number of the more prominent Members seemed to be missing. However, fortunately enough, just before they were due to speak, they trooped in one by one with plausible excuses for their absence. At one stage, we were hearing more apologies than at a Tiger Woods press conference. I will leave it to Members to decide whether those apologies carried the same level of sincerity. Nevertheless, the fact that various Members contributed from all quarters of the Chamber led to a useful debate.

As the Chairperson said at the outset, it is the Committee's intention that the report, which, as several Members said, is fairly lengthy and meaty, and the implementation of its recommendations will help to reduce barriers to access to public procurement opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises and for social enterprises. That echoes the Executive's commitment to prioritise the growth of the private sector, including SMEs, and to develop the social economy. As the Chairperson and other Members said, the £3 billion that comes from central government and the other money from local government indicates the significance of public procurement and shows that it is a key factor in the economy.

Several Members developed the theme of the importance of procurement as a tool for economic growth. For instance, David McNarry described public procurement as a key building block in our economic recovery and highlighted the challenges that the construction industry has faced. Other Members took a similar view. Mitchel McLaughlin pointed to the need for continued cultural change on the part of government purchasers to ensure that the recommendations become a reality. Declan O'Loan touched on that theme and highlighted the opportunity to achieve better value for money and, at the same time, to realise the need for economic and social benefit. In many ways, that is the report's key message: substantial expenditure on public procurement must be used more strategically to enhance our long-term economic and social well-being.

Members focused on the removal of barriers of access to public procurement. The Minister touched on that and outlined some initiatives that have been taken. Simon Hamilton talked about the need to build capacity in purchasing organisations and to increase appreciation of the procurement system among tenderers. A number of Members mentioned the need for better information as a tool for access to public engagement, and Tommy Gallagher, for instance, referred to the use of a central website. Adrian McQuillan suggested that the report's recommendations could result in changes that would create a level playing field and allow small businesses to play a pivotal role in the local economy.

The removal of barriers to access will increase the number of SMEs and SEEs that are involved in the procurement process. That will eventually lead to more organisations and enterprises winning government contracts. More than one Member said that it is a win-win situation to create better value for money, better potential value for money, better levels of service and more innovative business solutions as well as helping to build the local economy.

One of the more controversial aspects is the issue of frameworks and the suggestion that large contracts should be broken down into smaller ones. The Minister touched on that point at the end of his contribution and gave positive examples of how the Department is considering the report and some of its recommendations to seek better ways to progress.

Simon Hamilton said that we should not throw the baby out with the bath water. He said that we should not throw out frameworks; instead, we should establish a robust evidence base on which to build.

David McNarry, Mitchel McLaughlin and Tommy Gallagher welcomed the recommendations to break large frameworks into smaller lots and noted that that is common practice in the European Union. Indeed, there was a call for us to learn from elsewhere. Declan O'Loan also said that frameworks needed adjusting.

Fra McCann echoed the call to break frameworks down into smaller contracts so that smaller firms could compete. He memorably rejected the notion that big is beautiful, which is to be welcomed, coming as it does from him. *[Laughter.]*

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended that frameworks should not be used in future unless the procurement board can first establish a robust evidence base for allowing such practice in a Northern Ireland context. There needs to be an examination of frameworks, and, where possible, they need to be broken down in any procurement tender.

Several Members mentioned the growing role of the social economy. Fra McCann cited the number of enterprises in his West Belfast constituency. Harnessing the potential of those enterprises would make a positive contribution to local areas and the wider economy alike. That was picked up by the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Paul Butler, who committed to encourage DETI to work with DFP to address the issue of social economy enterprises. The report recognises the role of the social economy sector and acknowledges that specific work is required to increase its capacity and to allow it to compete for government contracts.

I commend the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for the hard work that went into the report. The approach to the Committee's inquiry may or may not have been unique, but it was certainly unusual, and it paid dividends. The stakeholder conference brought together a wide range of representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises, the social economy, academics and other experts. I think that it was Fra McCann who said that we had been on a learning curve: we all found it a very useful learning curve, and the well-facilitated

stakeholder conference played a vital role in helping us to focus our minds on what needed to happen in procurement.

The Minister and several Members made the point that procurement is not just a matter for DFP; it is a cross-cutting issue because of the amount of money that is spent and the fact that all Departments are involved. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel referred to the sheer volume of work that is required. Consequently, the implementation of the report is not a matter for one Minister, but is the responsibility of the whole Executive.

On behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Paul Butler recognised the need for DETI, CPD and DFP to work closely to take forward a range of recommendations, including the possibility of introducing a public procurement brokerage service to help social enterprises. Dolores Kelly, on behalf of the Committee for the Environment, pointed out the need for the application of good procurement practices across local as well as central government. The potential of a large local government procurement pool was raised several times during the Committee's deliberations. That requires us to tap into the expertise and co-ordination of central government.

The Committee was careful to recognise that there are individual departmental remits and that there is a degree of division of government responsibilities at local and central levels. In the report, however, the Committee sought to identify the full range of cross-cutting issues for implementation by the Executive, the procurement board, individual Departments and centres of procurement expertise as appropriate.

Stephen Farry and Simon Hamilton mentioned European opportunities and said that, in one sense, we should not be too narrow in our perspective. There is a concern that, for example, in the case of European, cross-border and international opportunities, there is almost a siege mentality that makes us worried about different firms coming from outside Northern Ireland and taking away local business. We need to recognise the opportunities that exist for competition in the single market and that local companies need to compete outside Northern Ireland. Increased competition also offers the advantage of achieving better value for money.

Stephen Farry mentioned the focus on small and medium-sized businesses. Thus, as in many of his contributions, he hit on points that other

Members tend to miss. On this occasion, I mean that as a compliment.

Dr Farry: Is that after yesterday's debate?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Yes.

Stephen Farry emphasised that although smaller firms must be helped by the Assembly, they should not limit their ambition. He also said that if we want to compete on the international stage, we should encourage small firms to expand and to become more export focused. That is one way in which we can draw additional money into the economy.

The Committee's report highlights the potential of using local procurement contracts as a basis for expanding SMEs and supporting them as they try to compete in procurement markets elsewhere. That, in turn, would increase the productivity and GVA levels in Northern Ireland.

Simon Hamilton spoke about the need to take a sensible approach. He said that we must strike a balance to ensure that we maximise social benefit and achieve value for money. Similarly, Stephen Farry said that public spending must extend beyond simply purchasing goods and services. However, he added that a potential consequence of incorporating social clauses was an increase in the cost of procurement. He posed the question of whether social contracts or direct government investment was the best way forward, and that issue must be considered.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, when making remarks in a personal capacity, strongly indicated that social clauses should be included at the tendering stage, as that would be one way of building in a level of local responsibility. The report calls for greater clarity from the Executive on their policy intention in that area and for clarification on the measurement of social value. It is important that we all identify the need for increased social value, but we must know precisely what that means.

There are examples of the use of social clauses in government contracts. The procurement board's pilot projects on utilising the unemployed in public contracts received a positive evaluation, and the lessons learned from that should be implemented elsewhere. The Committee's recommended approach on

social clauses is one of targeted use in cases for which clear evidence exists of the cost benefit.

I do not want to reiterate what the Minister said, but I welcome the positive and thoughtful approach of the Department to the wide range of issues that must be tackled. Simon Hamilton mentioned the dangers of taking “a wee look” at an issue, only for that to result in a substantive report several months later. The Committee considers that the recommendations arising from the inquiry will help to achieve priorities within the Programme for Government and will benefit the public sector, business and the third sector respectively.

The Committee looks forward to receiving a formal response to the inquiry from the procurement board after it has had an opportunity to consider formally the recommendations therein. I commend the report to the House, and I ask the Assembly to support the Committee’s motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on its inquiry into public procurement policy and practice in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Private Members’ Business

Dementia Research

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.

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Executive to commit to ensuring that funding for dementia research is increased to reflect the scale and seriousness of the condition and the impact it has on the thousands of people living with dementia, their families and carers.

In September 2007, the Assembly debated a Private Members’ motion on dementia to coincide with world Alzheimer’s day. All-party support was received for a motion that emphasised the importance of people with dementia and their carers receiving the best care available. Although today’s debate echoes the previous one, we want to focus on the urgent need for more research and development on the prevention, treatment and cure of this serious and complex disease, which has such a profound effect on the person with dementia and his or her family and carers.

4.00 pm

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

Dementia describes a group of symptoms associated with a progressive decline of brain functions caused by the gradual death of brain cells. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia and results in symptoms such as the loss of memory, understanding, orientation, calculation, language and thinking. Dementia is not a normal part of ageing. People with dementia have an increased risk of physical health problems and are dependent on health and social care services, friends, family and other support networks.

Dementia is a terminal disease. People with dementia can live for as long as 15 or 20 years after the onset of the condition. The rate at which dementia progresses depends on the individual concerned. Each person is unique and will experience dementia in his or her own way.

Dementia largely affects people who are over 65 years of age, but 2% of sufferers are under 65 years of age.

Very few cases of dementia are diagnosed in the early stages. Many of the associated symptoms can be attributed to other conditions, which makes diagnosis particularly difficult. Early diagnosis is important, because it allows people with dementia and their carers to plan better for the future; to start treatment that may slow the symptoms of the disease; and to get the information and support that is needed for a full life. Many Members know someone, whether a family member, a friend or a constituent, who has dementia. No single cure has been identified for dementia.

It can be deeply distressing for a person in the early stages of dementia to come to terms with the impairment to his or her memory and communication skills. It is heartbreaking to watch dementia gradually taking hold of a loved one, and research shows that those who care for people with dementia experience a high degree of pressure, mental distress, depression and guilt. A 2007 report, 'Dementia UK', estimates that there are more than 16,000 people with dementia in Northern Ireland. Indeed, that is a conservative estimate as only one in three people with dementia receives a formal diagnosis.

The Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland believes that there may be 8,000 more people living with dementia in Northern Ireland than official figures suggest. The 'Dementia UK' report predicts that, by 2017, there will be 20,500 people living with dementia in Northern Ireland, which will be a rise of 27% in 10 years. The report also predicts that, by 2051, there will be 47,000 people living with dementia in Northern Ireland. Two out of three of the 16,000 people living with dementia here are women.

One in five people who are over 80 years of age and one in 20 people who are over 65 years of age have a form of dementia. The proportion of people with dementia doubles for every five-year age group. One in three people who are over 65 years of age will die with dementia. Delaying the onset of dementia by five years would halve the number of deaths due to dementia in Northern Ireland. Some 1,400 deaths a year in Northern Ireland are attributable to dementia. Around two thirds of people with dementia live in the community, and the remaining one third lives in

residential care. Alongside Scotland, Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of people who are over 65 years of age who live in care homes.

The Alzheimer's Research Trust's report, 'Dementia 2010', which was published in February 2010, highlights the economic cost of dementia. It estimates that 820,000 people live with dementia across the UK, which is around the same number of people who have cancer. It reckons that every person in the UK living with dementia costs the economy more than £27,000 a year. That is higher than the UK's median salary, yet only 2% of the UK medical research budget is spent on dementia compared with the 33% that is spent on cancer. The Dementia 2010 report estimates that dementia costs the UK £23 billion a year. That is twice the amount that cancer costs, three times what heart disease costs and four times what strokes cost. Why, then, is the dementia research budget so desperately underfunded?

I call for a review of Northern Ireland medical research funding to assess current levels of dementia-focused research. As I said, dementia is not a normal part of ageing. It is caused by disease. Many factors, including age, genetic background, medical history and lifestyle combine to cause it. Better understanding of the causes of the disease can give an insight into ways in which dementia may be prevented.

The fact that dementia affects such a large proportion of the population demands that there be a significant increase in research funding for it. It does not make sense not to invest in looking for a cure when the human and economic impacts of dementia are so great. Dementia costs us more than heart disease and cancer combined. Investing money in research now could save billions from our health budget on medical and care bills later. It has the potential to alleviate considerable human suffering.

Research can help us to improve diagnosis, particularly at the earliest stages, when treatment is most likely to be effective. It will also inform us more accurately of the number of people who have the disease now and in future, and that will enable proper service planning. We all need to know more about the disease not only because of the economic costs but because of its social impact on people. More in-depth knowledge on the progressive nature of the disease could help people with

dementia and their carers to anticipate and plan for changes in their circumstances, thus giving people a better sense of control and less heartache.

Under way in our two universities are a small number of high-quality research projects which work in conjunction with our hospitals and memory clinics in the field of dementia. However, much more needs to be done. We have the skills, so we must now find the resources to make a real difference in confronting the illness. It is vital that we provide the funding to attract young, gifted research scientists to the field of dementia and that we support their sustained work in that field. The funding gap means that very few people can work in the field and achieve incremental advances in dementia research that are equivalent to those that are achieved in cancer research. We need a thriving dementia research community in Northern Ireland, across the UK and in Europe. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Easton: I support the motion, which raises questions about the inequality of funding between dementia and other serious illnesses. Dementia directly affects 820,000 people in the UK, but there are so many more people who are affected by that terrible illness about whom we do not know. The cost of treating someone with dementia is considerably more than that for somebody with cancer, somebody with heart disease or somebody who suffers a stroke. I am concerned that the costs will continue to rise, because more and more people are suffering from dementia, and that will, in turn, put further pressure on our Health Service.

Funding for research into dementia is considerably less than that for research into other illnesses. The imbalance needs to be addressed for the future of our Health Service. Why is that the case, given the fact that it costs considerably more to treat a patient with dementia? It has been found that dementia costs the UK economy £23 billion, most of which is made up of unpaid caring costs when care is provided by family or friends. Carers for those who suffer from dementia or any other illness must be praised for their dedication and commitment to and support for those who are less fortunate. They are the silent heroes in our society, helping people while exhibiting selflessness, diligence and care. We should be looking at ways of reducing that cost, and, by increasing research funding, we could look for

cheaper and better ways of treating those who suffer from dementia.

We must act now to facilitate the treatment and care of those who suffer from dementia, especially given that its prevalence is rising among younger people. According to the Alzheimer's Society, when people seek medical care they experience diagnosis and treatment problems, with few specialists being available to help sufferers. That is largely down to the small number of sufferers in their locality.

As a result of the greater emphasis on care in the community, the number of inpatient beds for people suffering from dementia or other neurological diseases has reduced. Consequently, patients who require inpatient care are placed in acute hospitals, where they contribute to what is known as bed-blocking, the effect of which is seen in hospitals up and down the country in the autumn and winter months. We must ensure that people who suffer from dementia receive a high standard of care and that their needs are met.

I commend the motion to the House, and I call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that dementia funding receives an equal and fair hearing because, although it is important to provide good services, we must act now to prevent spiralling costs.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to speak in favour of the motion. The statistics on dementia were highlighted by the proposer of the motion, so I do not intend to go over them again, except to reiterate that, given that only one in three people with dementia is formally diagnosed, the statistics that we have are based on conservative estimates.

The motion calls for increased research into the causes and effects of dementia. That is an important point, because without adequate research we cannot be informed about the way forward for treatment, interventions and support for those who live with dementia. Given that we have an ageing population and that we can expect a 27% rise in the number of dementia sufferers over the next 10 years, we need to move sooner rather than later.

The call for more research is echoed by numerous experts, and it was referred to in the Assembly Research and Library Service's

information pack. In a recent report, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics said that:

"the flaws in providing dementia care were similar to those in providing cancer care 20 years ago when the patient was seen simply as a disease to be treated. But since then cancer specialists had adopted a much more holistic approach, accepting that the patient's emotional and spiritual needs were also important."

We want a similar approach to tackling dementia to be adopted here.

A recent 'Belfast Telegraph' article quoted statistics such as:

"for every pound spent on dementia studies, £12 is spent on investigating cancer and £3 on heart disease."

Although I do not want to take away from that much needed research and investment, we need more studies into dementia. Spending money now will produce savings in health and care bills down the line.

It is also important that we recognise the contribution that carers make to society. In often demanding situations, they do a fantastic job of looking after their loved ones and friends, often without much support. Some trusts offer care packages consisting of 15 minutes of care a day in the morning; that is insufficient. Recently, I dealt with the case of an 87-year-old woman with dementia whose care package was reduced to that 15 minutes of support in the morning for her family and herself. Surely that is not acceptable and must be looked into.

The Minister promised to publish a dementia strategy early this year. Given that we are about to enter the third month of the year, I hope that the Minister will tell Members more about the strategy and when he hopes to see it published for consultation. We may be pushing at an open door and that, as part of his proposed strategy, the Minister has plans to increase research into dementia. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

I urge Members to support this worthy motion.

4.15 pm

Mr McCallister: Like others in the House, the Minister is well aware of the devastating effects that Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia have on sufferers, their families and carers. Dementia is a serious and

progressive condition that can cause memory and mood changes that sometimes make patients increasingly difficult to care for, as well as communication problems, which lead to frustration as patients experience decline in their ability to talk, read and write. Dementia can strip a person of the last remnants of independence and freedom. It can leave sufferers feeling vulnerable, frightened and confused.

As the illness progresses, most people become increasingly frail and begin to rely heavily on family and carers, which puts an enormous strain on them and the family unit. Like other Members who have spoken, I want to pay tribute to the work that many families do to look after a loved one. The caregiver or family member of a person who has Alzheimer's faces many challenges, both in adjusting to new roles and in coping with profound changes in a loved one. It is estimated that family carers for people with dementia save the UK over £6 billion each year. That is a huge financial cost.

Around 16,000 people in Northern Ireland suffer from dementia. However, as other Members have said, that number may be well and truly underestimated. The Alzheimer's Research Trust estimated the figure to be closer to 24,000. It is also estimated that there will be around 21,000 sufferers in Northern Ireland by 2017.

Under the current framework, the Department's aim is to provide care for people in their home whenever possible. A range of community services are in place to support that aim. Each person who is diagnosed with dementia and requires care and support receives an individual multidisciplinary assessment of his or her needs — physical, psychological and social functioning — as well as his or her carer's and relatives' needs.

The financial cost of dementia to the UK is over £17 billion each year. With the population ageing, that cost will only increase in the future. That is recognised by the Minister, who also understands that caring for people with dementia is an issue for today, not tomorrow.

I am disappointed for two reasons that the motion has reached the Floor of the House. First, as the House is well aware, in 2009 the Health Minister stated that his Department was developing a Northern Ireland dementia strategy to emulate successful strategies in Scotland and Wales. The strategy should be available for consultation in early 2010. It will review

the current level of service provision for people with dementia and their carers. It will make recommendations that will aim to significantly improve the services and support arrangements that are currently available. Secondly, the Health Service is already stretched as it struggles to find £700 million of efficiency savings over the next three years. My party and the PUP voted to exempt the Health Department from efficiency savings in the current CSR period. However, the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party shamefully insisted on them. Across all specialties in the Health Service, demand has risen by over 9%, yet funding has increased by less than half a per cent. The simple truth is that health and social care need significantly increased resources each year to meet demand and to improve quality.

Investment is also needed to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK. Compared with England, Northern Ireland faces a funding gap that will widen to some £600 million by 2011. The Health Department's funding in the next CSR period remains extremely clouded. With the current financial situation in the UK, the funding gap in Northern Ireland is set only to widen.

In the review of 2010-11 spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments, the Minister of Finance proposes that the Department of Health make savings of around £113 million.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please. Your time is up.

Mr McCallister: The health budget is under enormous strain. That must also be taken into account in this debate.

Mr McDevitt: When writing about his late wife, Iris Murdoch — a Dubliner by birth and the daughter of a County Down clergyman and, unfortunately, someone who was lost to this world through dementia — the author John Bayley said:

"Alzheimer's is, in fact, like an insidious fog, barely noticeable until everything around has disappeared. After that, it is no longer possible to believe that a world outside fog exists."

It is such a disease. It takes its sufferers by surprise and entraps them in their own mind. It leaves them feeling vulnerable, anxious and angry, and, more often than not, it leaves their family lost. They feel lost because of their inability to understand what is happening to the

person they love and their inability to know what to do to care for the person they love.

Formal diagnosis of dementia is critical. As we know, that is the gateway to unlocking the support structures that allow the state to intervene and support the victim of the disease and the family around them. Policymakers need to prepare for the increase in the number of dementia sufferers that will occur regionally, across this island, across these islands and globally. It will require long-term planning, but it cannot be ignored. It is like global warming: if we ignore it today, we will pay the price for having done so for generations to come. That is why today's debate is so important, despite the imminence of the strategy which we await from the Minister.

We know that there have been breakthroughs in diagnosis and that those breakthroughs have come about because of research. Rebecca Wood from the Alzheimer's Research Trust recently pointed out the potential value of research in an illustrative and graphic way. She said:

"If research leads to a cure for Alzheimer's and other dementias, annual saving to the UK economy would be equivalent to hosting the London Olympics twice, or funding every British university for three years."

That is the opportunity of investment in research, and it is available not only to our region but across the island.

I am sure that, when we see the dementia strategy, all of us will want to see a strong, deep and real North/South dimension to it, because we know the research community on this island is going from strength to strength. That is not a political statement; it is a statement of fact. There is an opportunity for us here, where we have a world-class research community, to become part of a broader research community on the island and, subsequently, to be part of a research community on these islands that will bring about the opportunity that Ms Wood identifies.

The Alzheimer's Society's report, 'Listening Well', made important points about the cost and impact of dementia on families. I will not repeat them, because Ms Lo, Mrs O'Neill and other Members have referred to them. However, they point out that the biggest slice of funding is taken up by late-onset treatment, rather than by early intervention methods. This is symptomatic

and indicative of the culture that is pervasive in our Health Service, which is to treat symptoms rather than make attempts to find underlying causes and take preventative measures. Taking the latter approach would save the state money and give the sufferer the opportunity for a greater quality of life.

I know that there is no cure for dementia and that the causes are not entirely clear, but there must be an increase in funding, particularly for early-stage research and early-stage treatment. We must also ensure that health professionals are trained and properly equipped to support families. The SDLP advocates the assignment of key workers to people who have been diagnosed with the condition, to assist in the early days of the aftermath of diagnosis. Those workers would put the sufferer and the family at the heart of what they do.

My allocated time for speaking is almost up, but I will finish with another quotation. This quotation is not from an eminent author but from a sufferer who was quoted in the Alzheimer's Society report, 'Listening Well'. When asked about planning for the future, the individual said:

"You've got five to ten years, 15 years of your life so you had to plan, what's my family going to do ... you have to think of it, you don't want to be a hinder (sic) to your family ... But then you get on with life and then you say right that's ok because they could have told you, 'Six weeks to live you have cancer'".

Mr Buchanan: I congratulate the Members who secured the debate on this important matter, and I am pleased to speak in support of the motion. Recently, I spoke in a debate about the devastating impact of cancer on the lives of sufferers and their carers. A similar dark cloud can descend when a person is diagnosed with dementia. In some ways, it is an even darker cloud, because the deteriorating nature of the sufferer's mental condition is such that it places an almost unbearable strain on loved ones and carers, and it leaves them having to take some very hard decisions.

I am sure that most Members will be aware and perhaps have personal knowledge of the devastating impact that dementia, in all its forms, can have on the lives of victims and their loved ones. Coping with dementia is a harrowing experience. In many ways, it is like a death sentence. Indeed, it was well described

in yesterday's 'News Letter' as "a living death". I have heard people speak of how the person they knew had, in reality, been taken from them before they had actually died. Therefore, in a sense, bereavement is experienced well in advance of death. That terrible burden cannot be fully understood until it is experienced. I watched my father-in-law in 2006 being nursed through dementia before his death, and I saw the anguish and pain that it can cause to a family. Therefore, I know something about it. I commend the carers for the tremendous work that they do in looking after people who have dementia.

The Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability in Northern Ireland reported in June 2007 that an estimated 16,000 people over 75 years of age had dementia, but already those figures have been shown to be over-optimistic. Figures in the UK-wide report published by the Alzheimer's Research Trust just a few weeks ago indicate that the figure for Northern Ireland is nearer to 24,000, which is 6,000 higher than the figure stated in the Bamford report. As medical knowledge grows, so does the accuracy of diagnosis, and it is estimated that the number of cases could rise dramatically over the next few years. It is also important to recognise that, although dementia affects mainly older people, it can also strike younger people.

I recognise the ongoing work that is being done by the Health Minister to improve the quality of life of dementia sufferers through, for example, the new dementia service development centre in Belfast and a dementia strategy, which I hope Members will soon have sight of. Although those measures are welcome, we must go one step further. We need to address the complex root causes of the disease. Research is vital, because it holds the key to our ability to control and minimise the impact of dementia.

I have no doubt that any disease of the brain presents the medical world with a major challenge, because even the most advanced computer is nowhere near as complex as the human brain. Indeed, even in the twenty-first century, some aspects of the brain have yet to be discovered and explored.

The recent important and detailed report by the Alzheimer's Research Trust, to which I referred earlier, tells us much about the impact of dementia on society, and it highlights the urgent

need for increased resources for research. Referring to the report, Rebecca Wood, chief executive of the trust, said:

"The UK's dementia crisis is worse than we feared. This report shows that dementia is the greatest medical challenge of the 21st century."

The report reveals that dementia places significant pressure — £23 billion a year — on the British economy, which is more than cancer and heart disease combined. However, it also reveals that research into dementia is massively underfunded compared with research into other major health concerns, such as cancer and heart disease.

It is vital that we face up to the reality that dementia is an increasing challenge. In order to tackle it properly, the finances and human resources need to be put in place to facilitate cutting-edge research. I support the motion.

4.30 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome and support the motion.

Dementia very much needs to be made a health and social care priority. There is a need for dementia research funding that will deliver improved treatment and care for those with the condition, now and in the future. Dementia research must receive the same investment as diseases such as cancer and heart disease. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, which accounts for 62% of all dementia sufferers. There are approximately 16,000 people with dementia in the North. Mr Buchanan alluded to that being an over-optimistic assessment. Statistically, by 2051, that number will have increased to about 47,000.

Urgent research is needed into early diagnosis, as only 40% of those with early-stage Alzheimer's disease are diagnosed, and, therefore, prescribed drug treatments. I met a musician friend on Sunday night with whom I had not spoken for quite a while. He told me that he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease two years ago, and that he is doing very well because he was diagnosed early and is getting beneficial drugs. In contrast, a very good friend of mine died 11 years ago from Alzheimer's disease. It took two and a half years to diagnose him. He died, tragically, at the age of 48. Early diagnosis is, therefore, extremely important, and I cannot overemphasise that.

Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia are among the world's most significant health and social care challenges. That highlights the need for more effective research to deal with the problem, because, unfortunately, there is a lack of awareness among policymakers, clinicians and the public.

In many cases, people with dementia do not seek health services. Too often, dementia is regarded as a stigma, and those with the condition can be excluded from even residential care. Primary health care services play an essential role in detecting, managing and preventing dementia. The Bamford review highlights a range of important issues that need to be addressed urgently. Those should include access to independent information and advocacy services for people with dementia and their carers.

There has to be a major focus on early diagnosis, intervention and treatment, as well as on improved access to general health and social care intervention for people with dementia. However, community care services are available only to those with complex needs and in situations in which carers are under so much stress that they are unable to cope. It is essential that effective drug treatments for dementia are made widely available and are not withdrawn on grounds of cost, as has happened in the past.

The Bamford review also highlighted significant issues about the rights of older people with mental health issues. There needs to be mental health law reform and proposals to implement capacity legislation. Mental capacity legislation would afford older people more protection. The assessment of an individual's capacity, and, when necessary, the use of independent advocates would respect older people's right to make their own decisions, which would be made in their best interest. Mental capacity legislation would be greatly welcomed and would fill the legislative gap here.

The Minister's decision to encompass mental health and mental capacity legislation in a single piece of legislation is welcome. Also welcome is the announcement of a dementia strategy for the North. Government here must ensure that we are well equipped to meet the needs of those individuals for support, service provision and treatment. The strategy must address the issues highlighted in the Bamford

review and should contain measures such as the development of memory clinics. Those measures should be implemented as a matter of priority.

So far, our strategy on ageing has fallen short in its promises for the older generation. The strategy's focus is fundamentally flawed. It lacks detail, innovation and focus, reflected by a lack of commitment to improve the lives of older people. Ageing will continue to be a negative experience for many older people until those issues are addressed effectively.

With an ageing population, it is time for us to take the ageing agenda seriously. If proper and adequate funding for dementia is not made available, we will continue to fail older people and to alienate them more and more. We do not have a choice; we need to act now.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to all those carers out there and organisations such as the Alzheimer's groups regionally and locally that do so much important and worthwhile work to highlight all the issues already mentioned.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Wells. Jim, you are welcome to remain seated if you so wish.

Mr Wells: Many would regard the Health Department in Northern Ireland as facing many great difficulties, and a series of conditions have been identified almost as time bombs that, if we are not able to deal with them, could lead to huge pressures on the health budget in the future. Such conditions include obesity and diabetes. The statistics for dementia are also extremely worrying.

Not only is dementia a condition that we know will increase dramatically as our population ages, its burden on the Health Service budget could become quite difficult to meet. It is an extremely distressing condition, not only for sufferers but for carers. I am very aware of the fact that for many carers, it is a living nightmare to watch a loved one going rapidly downhill, losing their sense of identity, their memory and all the things that are important to families. It is incredibly distressing.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has announced that there will be a strategy for dementia for Northern Ireland. Although I am speaking as a private individual, in my capacity as Chairman of the Health Committee, I have read several of these strategy documents and

found them extremely useful and helpful. Only half an hour ago, I was looking at some of the comments on the strategy for cancer. The general view is that such documents are a very positive step forward in dealing with long-term health conditions. Therefore, I welcome the fact that that publication is imminent, and the Committee looks forward to examining it and to doing what we can to encourage the Department to advance the cause of sufferers.

For reasons that many Members will know, I might be quite brief in my remarks today. As you can see, I am not my usual self. However, I have direct experience of the closure of Grove House, a residential home in Ballynahinch. There was quite an outcry about that because it catered for those with various stages of dementia.

As part of the group that was campaigning for Grove House, I visited St Paul's Court in Lisburn, where we saw a very modern and innovative way of caring for people with mental health difficulties. We were so impressed with that that I urge the Minister to consider, with his colleagues in the Department for Social Development, ensuring that that model is rolled out throughout Northern Ireland. That model offers hope for dealing with people with dementia with a real sense of dignity. It also offers independence, so that in a husband and wife situation, for instance, if the wife has dementia, her husband can still live with some degree of independence. He can care for his loved one but also get out and about. I welcome that.

I understand that that facility is run by Praxis Care, and I was told by Praxis Care that it believes that it can run similar facilities in Northern Ireland at a cost to the state that is one third less than if such facilities are run by the trusts. I urge the Minister to look at the option of increasing the provision for dementia sufferers by rolling out further models such as St Paul's Court, but using the voluntary sector as the delivery mechanism.

Finally, let us not get too despondent. We were all extraordinarily impressed with the testimony of Bishop Hannon, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and who, as Mr Brady said, got early diagnosis and has been able to live a very fulfilled and active life. That shows the importance of early intervention. Also, I am old enough to remember that 30 years ago, a diagnosis of leukaemia was a death sentence; the survival rates after five years with leukaemia

were extremely low. Now, 81% of those who suffer from leukaemia are alive five years later. Modern science is moving on rapidly, and I think that the Department and we as an Assembly need to give that research every encouragement.

If we can crack the terrible conditions of dementia, the saving to the Budget would be so enormous that every penny spent would be money well invested. However, we cannot blame the fact that a huge amount of money is going into cancer research but not into dementia research. That, unfortunately, indicates the opinion of many people, in that they do not perceive it to be the serious condition that it is.

Mr Gardiner: On 23 September 2009, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety opened the new dementia services development centre at the innovation centre at Queen's Island in Belfast, which is aimed at improving the lives of people with dementia, their carers and their families. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is co-funding that dementia centre for a further three years, following a successful pilot programme. The grant of £1.2 million will allow the centre to provide a range of resources, including education and training, consultancy, a library and information and research services. The centre writes and publishes practical guides and training packages, in addition to offering consultancy and information services about the latest thinking on dementia care. It also undertakes research into ways of improving the quality of life for those with dementia and their carers, and it will undertake research that is specific to Northern Ireland as part of the extension of the pilot programme.

As recently as 12 February 2010, the Minister for Social Development launched the Trinity Housing Association scheme in Downpatrick for 12 one- and two-bedroom apartments for people with dementia. The apartments for dementia sufferers will be arranged around secure courtyard gardens and will have internal communal spaces to cater for organised leisure and recreational activities. The purpose-built apartment complex was designed with wide corridors and low-level glazing to give the maximum amount of sky visibility and daylight. Subtle signage and technology to monitor residents' activity will also be provided.

I use those examples to illustrate that a great deal of good work is going on to help dementia sufferers, their carers and families. It is important that we, as an Assembly, recognise the work of those people who give so much of their time to their loved ones.

Dementia is a major problem for the Health Service. The Bamford review of 2007 estimated that in Northern Ireland, there were more than 16,000 people over the age of 65 with dementia, and around 10,000 of them have also been diagnosed as having Alzheimer's. It is estimated that the number of diagnosed cases is likely to rise to more than 20,000 by 2017 and to more than 47,000 by 2051.

Research that was commissioned by the Alzheimer's Society in 2007 suggested that more than 20,500 people in Northern Ireland would be living with dementia by 2017, which represents a 25% increase over the 10-year period.

Along with Scotland, Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of people over 65 years of age living in care homes in the United Kingdom, with fewer people receiving day care or domiciliary services. Research also suggests that fewer people in Northern Ireland with the condition receive care at home, compared with most other parts of the United Kingdom. Therefore, there is an issue to address.

Nationally, dementia costs more than cancer and heart disease combined, but it receives only a fraction of the research funding that is available for those two diseases. The Alzheimer's Research Trust has shown that for every £1 that is spent on dementia research, 12 times that amount goes on investigating cancer. With almost £600 million a year, cancer research funding is 12 times that of the £50 million that is devoted to dementia, while research into heart disease received three times as much. Only stroke research receives less funding. For every person with cancer, £295 is spent on research, compared with only £61 for each person with dementia. With 821,884 sufferers, dementia costs the UK £23 billion annually.

4.45 pm

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

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber this afternoon.

Like many Members, I can tell a personal story of caring for someone with dementia. Indeed, I have 22 years' experience of working in health and social services caring for people with dementia. Many Members spoke about the need for good education and training for both formal and informal carers. That is essential. Thankfully, the days are long past when people noted, belligerently, that an elderly parent or grandparent was "just doting". At least, we now know that their behaviour has a cause, and, indeed, that new treatments can provide some hope.

The motion deals primarily with the need to invest in research. Many Members have complimented the Minister and his Department for providing additional resources for dementia care and for making advances in that area. However, there is a need to look right across the spectrum of dementia types at the cause of dementia, its treatment and, hopefully, one day, its cure. We are really talking about investing in those three areas.

Mr McCallister was quick to point out — rightly, if I may say — that there are increasing expectations on health and social care services and that care for the well-being of all our citizens makes huge demands on the public purse. Nonetheless, money that is invested in research should ensure a better quality of service, and it may identify opportunities to prevent dementia in the first place. In a debate in the House on 24 September 2007, the Health Minister said:

"Researchers believe that for the majority of sufferers, Alzheimer's disease is due to a combination of different risk factors rather than a single cause. Such factors, which vary from person to person, may include age, genetic predisposition and other diseases or environmental agents. Alcohol can contribute to the onset of dementia, and smoking is now recognised as a possible contributory factor of the disease. It is not unreasonable to suggest that modern lifestyle may be having an impact on the growth of dementia." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p50, col 2].

Mr McCallister: The Minister established the Public Health Agency to address the changes in diet and lifestyle that we all want to see and to address the health inequalities and the other factors that the Member mentioned. Does the Member agree that the Minister has implemented that key policy by establishing the agency?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his intervention. That was the point that I was

going to make. The Minister has sought to communicate that message more fully and to make it a public health priority. We want to see more of that. We need to get the message out, particularly to our young people. There is evidence to suggest that young women in particular are making bad lifestyle choices about alcohol and tobacco. Dementia is not an outcome that often enters the minds of young people as being a possible result of their indulgence in those two habits. That shows the need for good research into ways to prevent dementia in the first place.

The Minister said that although the types of drugs that are available on the market today for early-onset dementia may be recommended under the NICE guidelines, he will still make the decision on whether they are the most cost-effective way in which to treat dementia. I wish to hear the Minister's thoughts on that a bit more.

My colleague Mr McDevitt commented on the North/South Ministerial Council's ability to invest on an all-island basis. Mr Gardiner mentioned the fact that Scotland also has a high number of people in care homes, so the British-Irish Council's ability to invest on an east-west basis should also be considered. Our citizens have legitimate, realistic expectations that we put dementia on those two bodies' agendas so that, where possible, we can avail ourselves of European funding opportunities that may present themselves. We could then put money into research on dementia because, right across western Europe, demographic changes are occurring. In moving the motion, Ms Anna Lo said that because increased life expectancy means that there are now more older people in our society, we will only ever see an increase in cases of dementia. Therefore, we should use all resources at our disposal to ensure that money is put in at the sharp end to fund research to tackle the disease much better.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. Figures are very important, because sometimes they tell the story. When we read that some 820,000 people in the United Kingdom have been diagnosed with severe cognitive decline, and that that figure is projected to double in the next 20 years, amounting to 1.6 million, that reveals some of the issues. Such age-related decline in mental functions may include some aspects of memory — we all probably know people who have been affected — processing speed and reasoning. All those mental functions are

important for carrying on everyday activities, because for many people it is just about living. That is the issue.

Thair loass can gyely vex aulder fowk, thair femmelies an' thaim at leuk efter thaim. Ap tae noo, scientists dinnae hae a fu' unnerstannin o' the caases o' mental deterioration an the stairt o' dementia. Hit bes a disorder at gets wor' es time gaes by an' hit effects hoo the brain waarks. Hit bes gye raire i thaim unner 60 an' moistly effects fowk aiged mair nor 75. Hit isnae a normal pairt o' agein'.

The loss of those mental functions can cause terrible distress to older people, their families and their carers. As yet, scientists do not fully understand what causes mental deterioration and the onset of dementia. It is a progressive disorder that affects how the brain works and is rare in those under 60 years of age, mainly affecting those over 75 years of age. It is not a normal part of ageing. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia. Another is vascular dementia, which can start after a stroke or even a series of mini-strokes.

I am not one for rhyming off statistics, but if one wants to tell a story about dementia and Alzheimer's disease, the statistics tell that story. Some 820,000 people in the UK live with dementia. Estimates from last year put that figure at 700,000. Dementia costs the UK economy £23 billion a year; it used to cost £17 billion. That is almost twice the cost of cancer, which costs £12 billion; almost three times the cost of heart disease, which costs £8 billion; and more than four times the cost of stroke, which costs £5 billion. Combined government and charitable investment in dementia research is 12 times lower than spending on cancer research. Some £590 million is spent on cancer research each year. I am not saying that that money should not be spent. I am sure that most of us in the Chamber give to charities, and I regularly give to cancer charities, because the disease has affected my family. Research into heart disease receives £169 million a year, while stroke research receives £23 million a year. All those figures tell the story of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Every dementia patient costs the economy £27,647 a year, against an average UK salary of £24,700. That figure can be compared with cancer patients, who cost the economy just under £6,000; stroke patients, who cost just

under £5,000; and heart disease patients, who cost around £3,500. The fact that dementia research remains so disproportionately underfunded is of great concern to a great many people whom the disease affects. It is estimated that some 25 million people — 42% of the UK population — are affected by dementia through their family and close friends. The concern of families affected in the Province is what led to this motion's being tabled.

Every one of us knows people who are in that category, and we understand the condition. The financial burden of the disease is already high and will increase as the population ages. Unless a cure, or a way of preventing dementia, can be found, it will not go away. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to sufferers and to society as a whole that investment be made into research, which is, perhaps, the aim of the motion.

According to 'Dementia UK', a report that was produced by King's College London, dementia costs the UK over £17 billion a year. That was the cost at the time of the report; it may be much higher now. We wish to see what can be done to change that. Potentially, the number of people with dementia will rise by 63% from 224,098 to 365,231, which puts the issue into perspective. The issue for me and many other Members is clear: carry out research, find a solution and find out what helps to slow the rate of decline. On a recent TV programme, it was stated that singing clubs can benefit people with dementia. If that is true, and it was stated as fact, all options must be considered to determine whether they can help with research.

I stand with all sides of the Chamber in support of the motion. It is feared that dementia may become a pandemic. I ask the Minister to ensure that that does not happen.

Mr G Robinson: The debate addresses an area of ill health that, worryingly, is on the increase. A few years ago, people were silent on the subject of cancer or talked quietly about it, and dementia is similarly treated now. That must change, and the debate can help to raise awareness of dementia.

In many ways, dementia is one of the worst kinds of illnesses with which families must cope. Their loved ones are slowly taken away from them while still physically healthy. Many families care for loved ones at their own expense — not that of the taxpayer — which

can lead to social exclusion and economic inactivity. The families and carers of people with dementia do the most amazing and dedicated job for their loved ones, and I pay a sincere and overdue tribute to them.

The Alzheimer's Research Trust document, 'Dementia 2010' states that it costs almost £28,000 a year to care for a patient with dementia. That shows how essential the care and monitoring of dementia patients is and how many staff are required to care for the patient. As a result of the funding of research and treatment, many people who suffer from other serious medical conditions can expect to have a good quality of life after receiving treatment.

Figures in the same report show that, for every £1 million that is spent on health-related research, almost £130,000 is, justifiably, spent on necessary cancer research, but only £5,000 is spent on research into dementia. That amounts to just £61 per person. The money for medical research is welcome and essential. However, it is also proven that research into any health condition ultimately cuts the cost of care to the public purse. Therefore, it is essential that more funding be directed towards dementia research so that, in the future, essential treatments and lower personal care costs can be developed.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will say that his budget is tight, and I agree with him, but so is that of every other Minister. Unless a focused research programme into dementia is started, the budget for personal care will continue to be stretched for many years to come. I hope that the Minister and all Members will see fit to support this worthy motion.

Mrs M Bradley: It seems no time since dementia was last debated in the Chamber, but it was more than two years ago. Much has changed since then, and the figures now are even more frightening. The Alzheimer's Research Trust reckons that 24,000 people here suffer from dementia, and that does not include the people who have not been diagnosed. That is worrying. It shows that there is a clear need for significant investment in research into the causes, prevention and diagnosis of dementia to ensure that sufferers are diagnosed early and are given access to the treatments, care and support that they need.

5.00 pm

It is incumbent on each of us to understand fully just how devastating a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease can be, for the family in particular, because the sufferer is often unaware of the symptoms. Regrettably, I can speak from experience on the issue. I was fortunate in that I was able to care for my father at home, because I had good family support from my husband, daughter and relatives. I never regretted it, even for one minute. I truly appreciated being able to look after my father. I said that if my father was not able to care for himself, I would do it, because no one knew how to care for him better than me. As I say, I was fortunate to be able to keep him at home. I did it with pride and with respect for my father.

It is imperative that the voices of dementia sufferers and their carers are heard. What is frightening about the forecasted figures for the number of people who will develop Alzheimer's in the future, particularly in Northern Ireland, is that the onset is occurring at younger ages every year. Paul Priddy from Northampton was diagnosed with the disease at 36. Although such cases are rare, they do happen. In my constituency, a young mother, who is trying to raise a young family, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's before she turned 40. That is devastating news for any family. It shows that there is real need for increased funding to help to develop new treatments and find a cure. Our constituents are living longer, which is placing even greater demands on the medical and caring professions, neither of which are receiving appropriate budgetary allocations to cope with the existing demands, never mind future demands. It is of the utmost importance that research and funding be increased so that new therapies and new ways to prevent the disease can be developed.

I welcome the Minister's new strategy. However, there needs to be investment in the Health Service to enable it to deal with what will be the biggest challenge that it and society, as a whole, will face in the coming years. The people who are suffering most from the cuts to front line services are older people, because they are the ones most affected by dementia. Some of them are not even getting the services that they need. Instead, they are being put on waiting lists to receive the services that they require now. That is not acceptable. I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement

the Northern Ireland dementia strategy at the earliest opportunity. I fully support the motion. I call on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to look at the health budget. A few weeks ago, I asked him to increase it with respect to older people. He asked me where I was going to find the money to do so, but it is the Minister of Finance and Personnel who must find that money.

The Minister of Health, Social Service and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the Members who proposed the motion for raising this important issue. As we know, dementia is a term associated with memory loss that is not a normal part of the ageing process. Although the chances of a person's developing dementia will increase with age, not everyone will develop the disease in old age. There are many different types of dementia, the most common being Alzheimer's, but they are diseases that can increasingly be treated and managed by the health and social care services.

On the basis of figures in a recent report commissioned by the Alzheimer's Research Trust, we estimate that around 18,000 to 19,000 people in Northern Ireland suffer from dementia. Given current trends, it is thought that that figure could rise to around 60,000 by 2051. It is clear that the human cost for people and their families living with dementia is huge. The increasing number of people with dementia is putting further pressure on health and social care services and on our staff, who are already struggling to cope with ever-increasing levels of demand without any additional funding. If the onset of dementia could be prevented or delayed, that would have a very important implication for the number of people with dementia and for the levels of service that they would ultimately require.

Groundbreaking research into dementia has allowed us to make great leaps in our understanding of the condition. However, to increase our understanding further, much more needs to be done in the three main areas that are critical to that research: cause, cure and care. Better outcomes for dementia sufferers can be achieved when we come to understand how to prevent dementia, and when we have better diagnoses and more effective treatment alongside high-quality care.

Our best hope for future treatments lies in translating research findings into new policies, services and treatments. However, that cannot be achieved by Northern Ireland in isolation. It

is only by pooling local talent and resources with researchers across the UK and internationally that we can make the necessary advances. My Department provides the health and social care research and development budget. Since its establishment 10 years ago, £3 million has been invested locally in research on dementia and related diseases. However, that is by no means the whole story. There is now a co-ordinated approach to health research funding. The pooling of national talent and resources has delivered a significant improvement in the UK's research infrastructure.

In addition to well-equipped laboratories, we have invested in technologies, including CT and MRI imaging systems, which provide knowledge about patients' organs without them having to undergo invasive procedures. Locally, my Department has directed a significant portion of its R&D budget to supporting clinical trials through the Northern Ireland Clinical Research Network. Through those trials, patients from across Northern Ireland can gain access to promising new treatments, sometimes years before they are widely available to Health Services. The clinical research network for dementia is newly developed, but it has already supported five new trials specific to dementia. Up until the end of January 2010, that has involved a total of 251 patients. Since November 2008, over £84,000 of funding from our R&D budget has been spent on supporting trials specifically on dementia. In addition, patients are still being recruited to those trials and further new trials are in development.

It is essential that we do not underestimate the massive scale of investment that is required to develop new treatments for dementia. That includes investment in money, skills and expertise, probably for the next decade and beyond.

Members may be aware that, in December 2009, the results of a major international collaboration were published in scientific literature. A worldwide team of over 40 researchers, including a team from Queen's University in Belfast, received funding from a range of funders, including the UK Medical Research Council, the Wellcome Trust and the Alzheimer's Research Trust, for work that has resulted in pinpointing a small number of genes that are strongly associated with Alzheimer's disease. That work was hailed by the media as one of the greatest scientific achievements of the year, and I congratulate everyone involved.

Knowing about those genes gives us, for the first time, specific biological targets at which to direct new drugs.

The role of charities and private companies in research is also very important. Members will note that just as Northern Ireland must engage with its national and international partners in the research field, so too must public bodies engage with the private and independent sectors to advance our knowledge.

I am committed to improving the health and social care services that are available to people with dementia and to their families. My Department is developing a Northern Ireland dementia strategy that will be available for consultation shortly. I expect to publish that strategy by Easter, so that the consultation process can be completed by summer. That will allow for an action plan to be developed during the summer of 2010. Issues that the strategy will address include raising awareness of dementia; improving prevention and delaying the onset of dementia; early recognition assessment and diagnosis; support for carers; legislative change on mental health capacity; and the promotion of research. The strategy will include an action plan with timescales and an identified lead organisation for each action. The strategy will recognise the need to support people with dementia and their carers so that, as far as possible, people can remain in their home environment and maintain their independence.

The expansion of flexible and responsive domiciliary care services is a central element of our response. We have worked closely with the independent and voluntary sectors and have made significant strides in that area over the past number of years. An increase in the use of technological aids can also enable people to remain in their own home. To that end, Mr Wells mentioned St Paul's Court in Lisburn. He will note that, if the capital provision is available, we have similar plans for St John's House in Downpatrick and for care homes in Ballycastle and Greenisland. However, he probably knows more about the availability of money than I do.

I am aware that it will not be possible to support everyone in their own home. If we cannot do so, we will ensure that everyone is supported in an environment that is right for their needs, whether through supported living or residential or nursing home care. The introduction this

year of the single assessment tool will bring a more structured approach to the assessment of the needs of older people, including those with dementia. The Bamford review estimated the health and social care costs of dementia services to be a little over £200 million at 2004-05 prices; they are probably closer to £250 million today. That cost relates only to health and social care costs and equates to about 40% of all spend on elderly care. It excludes contributions from people in care homes who meet some or all of their own care costs and excludes the cost of all informal care that is provided by families.

I recognise that a high proportion — almost half — of people with dementia in Northern Ireland are in care homes. Almost 2,700 care home places are registered for dementia care, but many older people in other care homes have dementia. I acknowledge the valuable role of family carers; they must be looked after. In the current funding cycle, I secured an additional £1.8 million to provide by 2010-11 an extra 2,000 weeks of respite care on top of what we already provide. I am also progressing work that arose from the recent joint review with the Department for Social Development on support for carers. That wider work will affect people who care for those with dementia.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) was challenged on its process for developing guidance on the use of drugs for treating people with Alzheimer's disease, and the drug company was granted a judicial review. The judicial review and subsequent appeals have now been completed, and the NICE appraisal remains unchanged. In light of that, I am reconsidering the applicability of the NICE guidance to Northern Ireland. At that point, my approach was that doctors should be allowed to continue to prescribe drugs for mild and moderate sufferers of Alzheimer's disease, although NICE guidance stated that drugs should be prescribed for moderate conditions only.

To help to raise the profile of dementia in Northern Ireland, I agreed last year to fund, in partnership with Atlantic Philanthropies, a three-year pilot of the dementia services development centre in Northern Ireland. The centre's work includes education and training, information services and research that aim to improve the lives of people with dementia and their carers and families. Above all, I recognise the burden of illness that dementia causes in

the population of Northern Ireland and the cost of caring that is associated with the condition. I am committed to funding research in that area and to ensuring the most effective translation of research findings into strategies for prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

Huge investment in research is ongoing, not only in the UK but throughout Europe and in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. That is a huge amount of work, and we will lend our support, albeit small, as best we can. However, as I said, the team at Queen's University has played a significant role in research to date. I would like to do more work, and I know that Members want me to do more. I know that Members understand that existing need must be addressed; Mrs Bradley made that point.

5.15 pm

I remind Members that dementia services is just one of the many areas of health and social care that is in desperate need of increased funding. Mental health services, learning disability provision and children's services are all seriously underfunded to the tune of 25% to 30%. I have looked to increase resources in those areas, as I have done for older people's services, because of the increases in demand. Mr Wells referred to Praxis Care, which says that it can provide private care at one third less than the current cost of those services. Well, it would say that, wouldn't it? I would like to see the figures and evidence of the comparable standard of care that would be offered at one third less than the cost at which such care is currently provided. Although the carers who provide their services through the trusts are routinely dedicated people, I do not pretend that we are providing a Rolls-Royce service, nor would I like to see where we would be if we spent one third less on care.

Our health and social care service has faced tough challenges in responding to huge increases in demand. Those huge increases have resulted in significant pressures across all services. The Health Service cannot keep pace with that growing need without additional resources. I need the support of the House if that is to change.

Mr McCarthy: I thank everyone in the Chamber this afternoon, particularly those Members who are signatories to the motion, those

who contributed to the debate, and Minister McGimpsey for his attendance and response.

The debate has come at an appropriate time, only a few days after attention was drawn across the UK to the fact that dementia costs some £23 billion a year. That is much more than what is spent on treating heart disease and cancer combined, yet, as was said over and over again during the debate, dementia services receive only a fraction of the overall funding provided.

Figures state that up to 24,000 people in Northern Ireland suffer dementia, some 8,000 more than had originally been estimated. The Alzheimer's Research Trust (ART) has revealed the stark differences in research funding. As was said earlier, the ART calculated that for every £1 spent on dementia studies, £12 is spent on cancer research and £3 on heart disease studies. We support spending money on all those areas of research, but the figures highlight the difference in the money that is spent on dementia research.

As was mentioned earlier, the £23 billion that is spent on dementia services comprises £9 billion on social care costs, £12 billion paid to carers and £1.2 billion on healthcare. Those are horrendous amounts of money in anyone's language, and it is reckoned that if more funding were directed to early detection and further in-depth study and research, those vast sums could be avoided or certainly greatly reduced.

As other Members said, the experience of living with dementia is something that we must all work to prevent. I hope that the Minister will note what Members have said today and take every opportunity to reduce the numbers of people who suffer with dementia. It is important to find more resources for initial research, because all the relevant reports warn of a huge rise in the number of patients with dementia, and with that comes the obvious need for additional funding. Surely it is in everyone's interest to invest now to save people from dementia, while at the same time saving enormous amounts of cash.

I pay tribute to the families and carers of people with dementia. Mary Bradley is a perfect example of that, because she looked after her father. It must have been a traumatic time for Mary, as it is for everyone. We all have some experience of what is involved, but carers must be acknowledged at the highest level.

Carers must be acknowledged at the highest level.

In mid-July 2009, 31 scientists and experts signed an open letter to the UK Government calling on them to end years of underfunding of dementia research. They claimed that the amount that is devoted to studying conditions such as Alzheimer's disease needs to be tripled. The letter warned the Government that the key weakness in research is the lack of funding, not the lack of talented scientists. One co-author of the letter, Professor Williams, added:

"Week after week British dementia scientists come a step closer to understanding what causes dementia, and how this might be translated into new treatments."

It is up to the UK Government and our Health Minister to formulate a national dementia research strategy. I am glad that the Minister is moving along those lines. The experts say that progress is possible, so let us go for it.

I will reflect on comments that were made during the debate. Most Members were straightforward in supporting the motion and used some of the statistics that I have mentioned. John McCallister said that he was disappointed that the motion had reached the Floor. I have no disappointment in that whatsoever. As Mary Bradley said, a similar motion came before the Assembly in 2007, and, by debating it again, we can measure progress. John referred to the strategy for 2010, which enlightened me somewhat. I was glad to hear the Minister say that he expects the strategy to go out for consultation around Easter. That is to be welcomed.

Conall McDevitt and Dolores Kelly referred to a joint all-island strategy. There is a lot of merit in that. The Health Minister made a statement this morning that outlined a number of important health aspects, and this is one that could be fitted into the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in health and food safety sectoral format.

Mickey Brady spoke about the importance of early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. He provided some examples that clearly showed that there is merit in quick diagnosis and that it can help to prolong a decent quality of life for people who have been diagnosed. The Chairperson of the Health Committee, Jim Wells, also spoke. We are glad to see him here. The last time I saw him, he was struggling to

stand. He rallied through his five minutes and said that he looked forward to his Committee scrutinising the new strategy. I am sure that, under his chairmanship, his Committee will do an excellent job, as it has always done. He mentioned the provision of Praxis care through the trust, which was an interesting comment. However, I do not think that the Minister was happy to hear what was said. Perhaps time will tell who is right.

Sam Gardiner mentioned the centre that opened recently. I presume that he was referring to the dementia service development centre that opened at the Northern Ireland Science Park at Queen's Island some time ago. That is welcome, and it shows progress. That may well have been a result of the debate that we held in September 2007. However, there is no problem in repeating what has to be done.

I welcome the comments of other Members, and I was encouraged by the Minister's response. He agreed that there should be cross-border and cross-channel information so that we can get to the bottom of the issue. As someone said, every little helps. The Northern Ireland Clinical Research Network is to be welcomed, and the Minister mentioned funding of £84,000 towards further investigation, which is also welcome.

We look forward to the strategy coming out at Easter. We welcome the Minister's support for care in the community, whether at home or in another setting. Finally, we look forward to everyone having a better future as a result of these debates.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Executive to commit to ensuring that funding for dementia research is increased to reflect the scale and seriousness of the condition and the impact it has on the thousands of people living with dementia, their families and carers.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Nutts Corner Racetracks

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 eight minutes.

Mr Kinahan: There is a mass exodus from the Chamber, but I am pleased to be able to speak on this subject. I am also pleased to be joined by the select few Members for South Antrim, on whose support I knew that I could rely. I raise the matter of the Nutts Corner racetracks because it is an important matter that affects many people who live in and around Nutts Corner. Indeed, the activity on the racetracks prevents some of those people from enjoying life in their own home.

Some 50 households suffer from racetrack noise in and around Nutts Corner. Thousands of people enjoy the racing that goes on there, and they bring trade, money and employment to the surrounding area. There are one or two racetracks with planning permission which control and limit racing as best they can to improve the lives of neighbours, and they lose much income as a result. However, there are four or five that do not make any effort to do so. In fact, one or two of them actively discourage any queries about what they are doing, I am told.

I raise the matter not just to help the residents and people involved with legal racetracks but to ensure that such racetracks are regulated and managed properly in future. I am still considering whether to bring forward a private Member's Bill, but there is little time. Indeed, one or more of the Bills on planning reform, council reform and clean neighbourhoods that are being brought forward could easily be used to address the matter.

I welcome the Minister of the Environment to the debate. I apologise for bringing him to yet another late debate, but I thank him for his attendance. I would like the Minister to consider making it illegal for any racing to take place before planning has been approved. Noise,

toxicity, lighting and pollution are examples of extremely poor neighbourliness. Nothing should happen on a site before a planning application has been approved. There should be no building, track construction, public events or anything else that could be used as a cover for illegal racing. I would like the same legislation to impose very large fines on anyone who breaks such laws. I am told that cash gate receipts for these events are extremely large.

I hope that planning policy can be progressed within a tight time frame. There should be discussion between councils, racetrack owners and local residents to find a suitable set of guidelines with which people can live and work successfully. That would enable the rural homeowner to enjoy his daylight hours with his family, inside and outside. Approved racetracks would be able to hold events that thrill and excite the crowds who watch them, passing on economic benefits to local businesses.

I will paint a picture of Nutts Corner for those who do not know it well. Nutts Corner is the site of the old Northern Ireland international airport. It is flat and widely tarmacked. It is not within any urban surrounding but is a rural location which, a community planner once told me, is ideal for a Poundbury-style environmentally friendly village. Nutts Corner is also the site of a large, regional weekend market. For many people from the west and the south, it is the main route to Belfast International Airport at Aldergrove, which is only a few miles away. Sadly, that makes it a less suitable site for another Poundbury; it is more suited to being a centre of motor and motorcycle racing for Northern Ireland and perhaps even Ireland.

5.30 pm

Nutts Corner experiences more traffic and aircraft noise than the average rural area. Add to that the Nutts Corner sports centre, where motorbikes and/or go-karts, PA systems and commentary are the norm. Although held less regularly, rallycross involves turbo-charged cars screeching and braking. That is the approved position. Now add five other racetracks, one of which involves scramblers, motorbikes and a PA system; another involves stock cars racing and crashing and a PA system; and yet another involves turbo-charged cars braking, revving and screeching and a PA system. Those are only three of the five other tracks.

I tried to find a way of describing what all of that would be like at home. Members should forgive me because this is not meant to amuse, but it gets across the point: it is like dad working in the garden with his chainsaw while his eldest son rides round the garden on a motorbike. At the same time, another son plays the drums in a room in the house, while a daughter turns her music on full volume to cover the noise, and somebody else in another part of the house tries to watch television. It all builds up. Cumulatively, it is a sort of noisy hell.

If the rural area of Nutts Corner is not regulated in future, that sort of noise could occur every daylight moment, from dawn to dusk, every day of the week. If one considers how few warm, sunny days we get, especially those that are good enough to enjoy outside, one will realise how important it is to regulate that area. Warm, sunny days are also best for motor racing and the attending crowds.

If I have my facts right, Sprucefield's racing closed down and moved to Nutts Corner, as did the racing that took place at Aghadowey, Magherafelt and Desertmartin. I am sure that there are many others. In time, others may be moved there as it is such an ideal location. A large area of Nutts Corner should be designated and zoned as suitable for motor racing and managed jointly by Lisburn City Council and Antrim Borough Council. Only in such an area should any racing be considered and approved.

One senior planner told me that current planning and noise laws are ample to manage the situation. Try telling that to the residents and neighbours who have fought for five years. Noise is complicated to measure, and councils are loath to take legal action where doubt or legal battles are likely. Planning is slow and cumbersome; it cannot be done quickly, especially when councils are involved. That is why I suggest a simple ban on all activity until planning approval is given to any would-be racetrack.

There is already a high level of noise at Nutts Corner, even with Belfast International Airport organising all the landing planes to come in on a steeper path. It is difficult to measure noise: should it be done cumulatively or at peak moments? Is an occasional backfiring or an overloud screech much more disturbing than the constant droning of a race? If all those considerations are added together, one will understand the difficulty of measuring

noise. It is worth considering whether noise measurement deals with the fundamental problem of what disturbs a person in their house and whether the right level has been taken into account.

GB laws allow any racetrack 14 days' racing and practice. If people split hairs, as some do, there are 14 days for racing and 14 for practice, making 28 days. If it is done under a different name or in a slightly different place, there could be many more 14 days' or 28 days' racing. Who counts how many days people race or practice?

Racing could be limited by time or engine size or specifically or cumulatively by licence; I leave that to the experts. However, I plead with the Department to take urgent action now to stop all unapproved racing and to impose suitably high fines when the law is broken. The Department should set up a dynamic group of stakeholders to draw up guidelines and regulations for all motorsports events that councils and courts could enforce quickly and easily. I hope that we might do that within the next year, before the next Assembly elections.

The one company there that is approved tries to work with residents. It has put up banks to screen noise, moved a bank, limited the PA and reduced the amount of racing; that is the sort of attitude that I want to see.

I want Nutt's Corner to thrive as a successful racetrack and as a place to live, so I ask that unapproved racing be stopped until we legislate in the next year to deal with the regulatory side of the problem.

Mr T Clarke: I support Danny Kinahan and share many of his frustrations. I apologise for the absence of the MP for South Antrim, Dr McCrea, who is on business in Westminster this afternoon. I should also declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, which has been monitoring noise in the area for a long time. As a member of Antrim Borough Council, I apologise for the council offloading the problem and selling it on to someone else. When the site was owned by the council, it had an opportunity to do justice to the people who live in the area by closing down the commercial enterprise in question. Unfortunately, the council decided to sell the site to a private enterprise, which enhanced its use and, consequently, made life less enjoyable for the people in the area. There was a time when work was being done to limit activity on the site to carts only, rather than

other motor vehicles. Unfortunately, the council made the wrong decision when it sold the land, so, as a member of the council, I apologise for that decision.

The Minister is listening intently, and he has been familiar with the case for some time, even before he took on his present position. The problem in the area has existed for some years. I support motor sport, but there is a place for it, so measures must be taken to allow people who live in the surrounding area to enjoy their properties without having to endure noise nuisance and other forms of pollution.

Danny referred to work that was done on one of the tracks. I do not commend that work so highly, because I believe that the track owners have added to the problems. They constructed earth banks very close to the river, altering its course; there may even be questions about some of the debris that finds its way into the river. Questions must also be asked about how the material that forms the banks was brought to the site. Was it licensed material? Did the track owners seek the relevant permission to bring it on site? Many questions must be answered, so, although it is easy for Danny to claim that the track owners have done a wonderful job, one cannot declare something to be a wonderful job if it has not been done lawfully, and I question some of the amendments that they have made to the site.

The track owners are not the only ones to blame; people on other sites have done nothing to prevent noise in the immediate area. I call on the Minister and his Department to see how the rules might be applied more stringently. I share Danny's concerns about preventing someone from building or running events until they have received the relevant permission. Unfortunately, however, that is not the system that we enjoy in Northern Ireland. The system needs to be overhauled to give enforcement teams more power to prevent building or events from taking place until the relevant permission has been granted. I encourage the Minister to consider how he might legislate to address the problem. In the immediate area, many problems would have been alleviated if the enforcement process had been easier.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will not find any objections to the subject of the debate. There will be consensus, and no politics are at work. Many people are affected by the problem, and,

in the past five years, this is the first time that members of all political parties have got together to meet residents in an area and to speak with one voice. We are all concerned about the problems at Nutt's Corner.

The issue must be addressed for that reason. People who have chosen to live in that rural area should be able to enjoy their properties. Those who enjoy motorsports should be able to do so but not to the detriment of the people who live in the area.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

We must recognise that there is a history in that area of the type of activity that Members described. There is also a history of unapproved activity and of complaints about noise pollution, which go back more than a decade and a half. That noise pollution is to the detriment of citizens who live in the vicinity and are entitled to the quality of life that they previously enjoyed.

We are also faced with a history of a lack of enforcement. The nuisance was first reported to Antrim Borough Council, which, instead of acting responsibly and responding to the nuisance, actually divested itself of legal responsibility by selling the site on. It did not sell it on for another purpose or with conditions; it sold the site on without any conditions to a proprietor who would continue to use it for the same activity. In anybody's language, that is a disgrace. The problem has since multiplied. Instead of there being one track, there are now six. We are talking about the fact that a number of planning applications are in the system. We are talking about planning officials who say that they have no responsibility for environmental health, because that is a discrete function that falls to councils. One such council is Antrim Borough Council.

Antrim Borough Council was faced with a situation in which Lisburn City Council, to its credit, actually responded to complaints. It has just occurred to me that the Minister was perhaps a Lisburn councillor at that time; I do not know. Lisburn City Council threatened Antrim Borough Council with a noise abatement notice. That provoked Antrim Borough Council to sell off the site. That is hardly the most enlightened response to what was, quite clearly, an identified and substantiated complaint.

Lisburn City Council carried out its own noise-monitoring surveys and established that there was a statutory nuisance. It then activated its statutory powers. In a sense, it did so to compel a local authority that was not prepared to meet its responsibilities or to use the selfsame statutory powers. That is a strange and sad tale. However, it is necessary to get a grip of the matter and to understand how difficult it has been for residents to find the redress to which they are entitled.

Trevor Clarke set out fairly the fact that all elected representatives from the different parties felt compelled to come together and to speak with one voice on the issue. Considerable leadership has been demonstrated. As we all know, many issues divide those parties. However, they have come together on this issue. We appeal to the Minister to get to the nub of the lack of enforcement and the lack of willingness to use or, indeed, enhance existing statutory powers.

The device that Antrim Borough Council used is, in fact, available to any operator, should councils be compelled to use their powers and apply enforcement notices. If the site is sold on without conditions, the entire noise-monitoring process must be carried out again to re-establish the case. The matter dies with the transfer of the property unless the person who sells the site is prepared to act responsibly and ensure that those conditions are transferred.

In presenting the Adjournment topic, Danny Kinahan spoke much more positively about the site. He avoided naming the proprietor, and I will do likewise. However, I am not impressed by what I have seen of the responses to local people and those whose quality of life has been virtually destroyed by the activities. It is a professional operation. They take account of public relations issues, but they are in business, and their business involves a considerable level of noise.

5.45 pm

Some of the other tracks in the vicinity have hosted activities such as bus demolition derbies, which are noisy events that cause much disturbance. That is compounded by the fact that the buses that are destroyed in the derby are burned when the event is over. Overnight, people burn the material to ease its disposal and removal. There is no concern whatsoever for the environment, and nor does there appear

to be any reaction from those who are charged with ensuring that such contraventions never happen. They do happen, and there are many witnesses to that type of activity.

For some reason, there is a stand-off about responsibility for the activity. I think that it emanates from the Department through the various agencies and down to the councils. They should ensure that any legitimate sporting activity on the track is properly regulated. I have no particular interest in the sport, but I accept that it is important to a certain section of our community. They have the right to enjoy their sport but not at the expense of the quality of life of the local neighbourhood. Those people are being victimised and neglected.

The Minister would do all of us a service if he reviewed whether there are adequate powers. If the conclusion is that there are, he should examine why they are not being applied. If they are not adequate, he should bring forward measures to tighten up the control and regulation of the sport. I am certain that he would get support in the Chamber if he introduced such measures.

Mr Burns: This is an important subject. I declare that I am a member of Antrim Borough Council. I thank my colleague Mr Kinahan for securing the Adjournment debate.

The Minister must be made fully aware of the situation at Nutts Corner, so I will take the opportunity to tell him about it. I am pleased that he is in the Chamber to respond. Over many years, my office has been flooded with complaints about the racetracks, and I am sure that every constituency office in South Antrim has had the same complaints, as have many offices in Lagan Valley. The issue is not solely an Antrim Borough Council problem; it crosses over between Antrim Borough Council and Lisburn City Council.

I have made numerous representations to Antrim Borough Council and to various officials on the matter, and I know that other Members who are in the Chamber have done the same. However, not only does the problem drag on; it gets worse. Nothing ever seems to be done about it. The big issue is the noise. The majority of complaints are about the deafening noise of the race events and the practice runs. I am not a killjoy or anti-motorsport; I want people to enjoy themselves. However, for a long time, I have been calling for the commercial and

industrial development of Nutts Corner, because it has great potential. I want Nutts Corner to be developed over time into something similar to Mallusk industrial estate. If that development were properly controlled, it would become a major asset to Antrim Borough Council, Belfast and Northern Ireland.

The situation is ridiculous. Other Members said and the Minister confirmed that there are two approved and lawful motorsport tracks at Nutts Corner. One is the long-established motorsport centre at the Dundrod Road, and the other is the stock car track, which is known as the Nutts Corner raceway, at the Moira Road. The Planning Service is investigating four alleged unauthorised tracks in the Moira Road area of Nutts Corner. To my mind, it is unbelievable that anyone can simply build a racetrack and start running events with no regard for building control, health and safety, damage to the environment or concerns raised by residents. It makes an absolute mockery of the law. Therefore, I ask the Minister to use the powers at his disposal to uphold the law.

Council officials have confirmed to me that, under pollution control legislation, they can investigate, monitor and take enforcement action against nuisance noise from motorsport racetracks. Those powers also extend to neighbourhood councils to take action against nuisance noise arising outside their area.

Residents come into my constituency office wanting to know what action has been taken, why more action has not been taken, where the enforcement action is, why prosecutions are not taking place, and, above all, when something is going to be done. I call on the Minister, in the strongest possible terms, to demand from his officials in the Planning Service, the various environmental crime units and council officials that they get a grip on the situation and force the owners of those racetracks to obey the relevant rules and regulations or close down the racetracks. They are making people's lives a misery, and they are making a mockery of the DOE, Antrim Borough Council and Lisburn Borough Council.

Mr Kinahan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I failed to declare earlier that I am a member of Antrim Borough Council.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That has been noted.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I thank the Member for South Antrim Mr Kinahan for raising the issue through the adjournment debate. I recognise that it is an issue that several Members and their constituents are deeply concerned about, and I have already supplied answers on the matter to Members who raised questions either individually or through the Environment Committee. However, I welcome the opportunity to provide some background to the case and to explain the current situation.

There are six motorsport tracks in the Nutts Corner area, five on the Moira Road and one off the Dundrod Road. Each track has a different planning status, and I shall endeavour to clarify those for Members. First, my Department must recognise that there are permitted development rights under the Planning (General Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 1993. Those rights allow the use of any land for not more than 14 days in any calendar year for the purposes of motor car and motorcycle racing, including speed trials and practising for those activities.

Two tracks are availing themselves of those permitted development rights — Sideways Racing Club and Supermoto NI. There is no evidence to suggest that the permitted development limits have been exceeded in either of those venues. Indeed, I have been advised by the local environmental health office that Sideways Racing Club has not used the site since last summer. The Supermoto club has published its schedule of seven upcoming events for the 2010 season, and they are also within permitted development limits. A storage container has been removed from the site at the request of the divisional planning office.

Another two of the tracks are lawful. The stock car racing track was granted a certificate of lawful development in July 2006. The Nutts Corner motorsports centre, which was formerly owned by Antrim Borough Council, is in established use. A recent application for replacement of burned out buildings at that venue is going through the planning process, having been deferred for a meeting with objectors.

The remaining two sites are the subject of ongoing enforcement proceedings. As a result of action by my Department, a retrospective planning application has been received for J&R Motocross circuit. It has been determined

that the application should be accompanied by an environmental statement. The regulations require the environmental statement to be submitted before 17 June, at which time the statement will be advertised and the members, consultees and public will have the opportunity to make their views known, should they so desire.

In the remaining case, the Shale arena, my Department has served a submission notice requiring the developer to submit a retrospective application for the development. Failure to do so can result in a prosecution through the courts. Alternatively, an enforcement notice may be served. I must emphasise that the submission of any retrospective application is without prejudice to the outcome.

My Department is keeping all the cases under review and, if required, will carry out enforcement action under planning legislation. Noise nuisance from any source, whether lawful or otherwise, falls under article 38 of the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, under which councils have the power to seek abatement for statutory nuisance where it exists.

Although I recognise that there can be benefits to the rural economy and tourism from all kinds of motor sport, they must be the subject of planning regulation to ensure that they are appropriate to their location and must be managed and controlled to avoid conflict with the enjoyment of the countryside and people's dwellings. The House can be assured that the Department is doing and will continue to do everything in its legal power to regularise unauthorised motor racing in the area and to take whatever action is deemed necessary.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister spoke about 14 days' permitted development rights. Can he make changes, as the Member opposite suggested, to prevent a change of ownership extending that period to another owner? Can that loophole at least be closed?

The Minister of the Environment: With regard to permitted development rights, any landowner can operate that type of facility for up to 14 days in a year. The two sites at Dundrod, as I understand, have had very limited, if any, works, which would not constitute development. Since there are concrete runways, individuals have been able to use them for racing.

I know the area pretty well. I travel past it regularly and have seen some of the activities that take place at the site. What goes on there does not necessarily add to Northern Ireland; much of it has a second-rate, shoddy appearance that does little for tourism. The Assembly, Executive and the Members for South Antrim should be looking for a better solution for Nutts Corner. It is a strategic location that could bring huge added value to the area. I know that many would like to see the roads improved, particularly for travelling to the airport, especially for traffic travelling from the Republic of Ireland. Perhaps the Member opposite will press that issue with the Minister for Regional Development. He may have more success in that than some of the rest of us.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister said that there is an opportunity for added value to the area. Again, I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, but the council has lobbied for re-zoning the area. However, there was a problem about industrial development. Has the Department of the Environment considered that approach, which would add value to the area and could prevent the land being used for motor sports?

The Minister of the Environment: The Department has provided the opportunity for such development to be advanced in the next area plan for the Antrim area. We should be looking at Nutts Corner as a site of strategic importance, and there is a huge opportunity for a master plan to be developed for the site, which may include warehousing and a proper motorsports arena to attract international events and do things properly in the area, as opposed to having a collection of people who are operating at the margins, if I may put it like that. There are tremendous opportunities for that area, and Antrim Borough Council should be focusing on a significant development that would be in the wider interests of all the people of Northern Ireland. That would be a considerably better position than we are in at present and would be a huge advance on what is currently taking place.

6.00 pm

I can sympathise with people living in the neighbourhood, particularly with regard to some of the events that take place. However, we should not castigate all the operators; a number of the operations are much more professional

and better managed than some of the other activities. It is not appropriate to put everyone into the one category in that respect. We should encourage that which is right and seek to discourage that which is wrong.

Three Members have declared themselves members of Antrim Borough Council. Noise, which is the main issue, falls to Antrim Borough Council to regulate. Therefore, I trust that the Members who raised that issue today will be as vociferous when raising it with their council. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr McLaughlin: Can I intervene?

The Minister of the Environment: I was finished, but I will give way.

Mr McLaughlin: Trevor mentioned the emergence of a flooding issue as a result of earthworks that were constructed on one of the tracks. I decided not to extend my contribution on the basis that that had been drawn to your attention. Is that the Department of the Environment's responsibility? The flooding is a direct consequence of unauthorised works that were constructed on one of the tracks. The shale overspilled into the river and changed the direction of the water, and that has had direct flooding consequences for some of the householders in the area.

The Minister of the Environment: The free passage of rivers is an issue for the Rivers Agency, which falls under the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to respond on that.

Mr Kinahan: *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of the Environment: Sorry, do you want me to give way?

Mr Kinahan: Please. I want to go back to my main point. Will the Minister consider introducing legislation that makes it easier to stop racetracks operating until they get approval?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member raises a valid issue that relates to permitted development: the 14-day issue. Addressing that would involve introducing some form of primary legislation. We have a busy legislative programme, so that is not going to happen within the lifetime of this Assembly, whether that ends in May 2010 or May 2011. Members might wish to bring that to the Environment

Minister of the new Assembly to see whether the issue can be taken forward then.

I think that I am finished this time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Adjourned at 6.02 pm.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

22 February 2010

Forestry Bill (NIA 11/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr (Chairperson)
Mr Tom Elliott (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr William Irwin
Dr William McCrea
Mr George Savage
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Mr Michael McCann	}	<i>Department of Agriculture and Rural Development</i>
Mr Stuart Morwood		
Mr John Joe O'Boyle		
Mr David Small		

The Chairperson (Mr Paisley Jnr): I welcome David Small, who is the chief executive of Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD); John Joe O'Boyle, who is Forest Service's director of forestry; Michael McCann, from DARD's policy and legislation branch; and Stuart Morwood, who is Forest Service's director of woodland development and strategies. I suggest that we go through the Forestry Bill one clause at a time, and if we want to ask you a question or if you want to impart any information to us, we will deal with each matter as it arises.

Clause 1 (General duty of the Department)

The Chairperson: Clause 1 has been discussed extensively to take account of the fact that the Bill must be forward-looking and provide opportunities that did not exist previously. We were concerned about the establishment

of delivery plans, which, although not in the Bill, the Department stated, and the Minister will reiterate at Consideration Stage, its commitment to publish. Access to the delivery plans in advance would help the Committee to ensure that there are no surprises and allow us to properly interpret clauses. The Department's commitment to that level of co-operation would help us to reach an affirmative view.

For example, the equine industry is not mentioned in the legislation, but would it be a fair interpretation to say that the Bill will provide opportunities for that industry? In addition, forests could be made available to people with other sporting and recreational interests, such as mountain biking or motorbike scrambling. I am reluctant to list all the interests that could be involved because, inevitably, I will omit some incredibly important pursuit that should be accommodated. We want to ensure that the Bill is flexible and that the Department will not be draconian in preventing people's access to and use of forestry land. Such provisions will not be in the Bill, so perhaps you could include something in the delivery plan to reassure the Committee that those pursuits will be embraced.

Mr David Small (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): We avoided including in the Bill every form of recreation that we will be able to facilitate through the new legislative framework. However, you are right to say that the framework will give us scope to address and accommodate all sorts of recreational, sporting and tourism activities. That, I suppose, is what lay behind the decision to widen the Department's general duty in clause 1. The delivery plan could refer to some of those specific areas, but it is also relevant to say that our business planning process happens every year, so, each year, the Committee will have an opportunity to witness the new areas that we are beginning to address. Our recreation strategy does refer to those various types of recreational and sporting activities, and it commits us, through a three-year implementation plan, to exploring sporting, outdoor learning, leisure and recreational opportunities. That strategy was brought before the Committee, and, each year, we will commit to delivering subsequent strategies' implementation plans. The Bill definitely gives us the necessary scope and powers to deliver on those commitments, and our business

planning process and the delivery plan can help to capture some of that.

The Chairperson: Our issue is with where the Department considers it appropriate to do those pursuits. I specifically asked that the Committee have early sight of the delivery plan because we want to know exactly what we will be voting for and that as liberal an interpretation as possible has been applied.

Mr Small: I think that we can do that, because, as I said, we have already made a series of commitments in our recreation strategy. We can mirror some of those commitments in the delivery plan. Obviously, we will not be able to indicate precisely which initiatives we will take forward each year, because we need to decide what opportunities are available at a given time and what partners are available to work with us. I think that we will be able to say something positive in the delivery plan.

Mr Shannon: I wish to develop the Chairperson's point. Membership of the Ulster Rural Riders Association is at its highest and most active in north Down and Ards, part of which is in my constituency. Private enterprise has helped riding at Rosemount near Greyabbey become very successful. In a way, you confirm that in clause 1. However, in my constituency, only a couple of forests are suitable for horse riding. Will zoning be used there? Can the land be used for horse riding but not for other sports? Are the forests to be used only for walking? How will the process work?

People from the Ulster Rural Riders Association have contacted me. Killynether Wood may not be the most suitable location in which to develop a rural riding track, but, if the organisation wanted to use that site, or Ballysallagh Forest at Craigantlet, which is the other forest in the north Down and Ards area, for that purpose, would you view that as an opportunity for the equine industry? The Ulster Rural Riders Association has more than 46,000 registered members, the value of the sport is £121 million, and its revenue is £7.7 million a year.

The Chairperson: You have obviously produced those figures off the top of your head.

Mr Shannon: Yes; absolutely. My knowledge of horses is limited. All that I know is that King Billy rode one at the Battle of the Boyne, but I represent many people who have a real interest in horse riding. They are very keen to ensure

that the opportunity is there for them to ride horses in forests, and I want to ensure that they have that opportunity. Will the legislation provide that opportunity? It would not be satisfactory if those people were told to do their rural riding in Cookstown, Limavady or Fermanagh — no disrespect to those places.

The Chairperson: The horses would be exhausted by the time that they got there.

Mr Shannon: Opportunities should be available where there is the greatest number of people. How can you assure me, a representative of those people, that that will happen?

Mr Small: There are opportunities. We already facilitate significant pony-trekking and horse-riding opportunities in our forests. We determine where it might be appropriate for those activities to take place through our forest planning process, which is cyclical. We consider each area in an area-wide context. We determine what the existing provision is in the forest block and consider what more may be possible. We also consult with local groups on our forest plans. Out of that process, we hope to identify opportunities with potential partners. One example of our doing that is at Castle Ward, where we work in partnership with the National Trust to develop a multi-purpose trail network, which will include mountain biking and pony-trekking, as well as walking.

It is through that combination of our forest planning process and our work with partners that opportunities will materialise. There are real opportunities in the forest estate, and I do not think that we would ever contemplate having provision for pony-trekking only in the north of the Province. Our expectation is that it will be well spread out.

Mr Shannon: You mentioned the relationship that you have with potential partners. If, for example, an organisation were to suggest that it wished to develop with the Department a rural riding pathway or a bridle path, would you be open to suggestions and negotiations?

Mr Small: Yes; I think so. We may not be able to do so in every circumstance, because it may not always be suitable, but we are willing to consider possibilities. John Joe has been leading work with the British Horse Society Ireland, which has considered our recreational provision for pony-trekking and horse riding across Northern

Ireland. We are trying to find a way in which to deliver that at a strategic level.

Mr John Joe O'Boyle (Department of Agriculture and Rural Department): Our aim is to establish a strategy to provide the necessary facilities and strategically to consider specific areas of forest that could meet local demand.

Mr Shannon: It is about determining the demand for such facilities and deciding where the people want them. That is a key issue.

Mr O'Boyle: We recognise that where that demand is can be part of a strategic demand to which quite a lot of people in a particular area want access. We realise that, in some cases, there is a more local, geographic demand, and that we also need to provide for local need that is not connected to a more strategic demand. For example, the demand from people who want to ride horses now and again in a local wood that is not too far away from them is different from that of people who want to participate in 10 or 12 events a year in Northern Ireland. We want to try to make provision for people who want some access to local woodlands as well as for those who want access to a more strategic need for pony-trekking.

Dr W McCrea: I am concerned that the number of vehicles that are on the roads these days makes it difficult and dangerous for people who go horse riding. We need to look at the alternatives.

I seek clarification on clause 3(2)(d), which states:

"such other recreational, conservational or educational facilities as the Department considers appropriate."

Do you think that horse riding and carriage driving should be considered recreational activities? Is that a proper interpretation?

Mr Small: Yes. We already make good provision for pony-trekking.

Dr W McCrea: Therefore, those activities would come under that definition?

The Chairperson: We want absolute clarity on that.

Mr Small: Clause 3(2)(c) also refers to bridle paths.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 1, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Provision of facilities on forestry land)

Mr Savage: Before we agree to clause 3, I seek some clarification from Mr Small about viewing points and bridle paths in clause 3(2)(c). Will the horse fraternity be included under that paragraph?

The Chairperson: To be fair, David has just drawn our attention to clause 3(2)(c), which states that facilities may include:

"viewing points, bridlepaths, nature trails, arboreta, wildlife enclosures, interpretative centres, conservation areas and scenic drives;"

For the record, because the meeting is being recorded for that purpose, when Mr Small was asked by Dr McCrea whether the clause included the equestrian fraternity, he said yes.

Dr W McCrea: He did say yes.

The Chairperson: There is clarity on that paragraph. I am not going to open it up for discussion again.

Mr Savage: I am happy enough.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Use or development of forestry land)

The Chairperson: Do members have any points to put to the departmental officials on clause 4? The Committee Clerk will summarise the clause for members' benefit.

The Committee Clerk: Clause 4 combines with clause 7 to allow for bodies corporate, and so, to be included for the purpose of those functions. The Department's proposal is to delete subsections (2) and (3) will be deleted from the Bill, and clause 7 will refer back to clause 4. Members agreed that at earlier meetings.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 4, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 5 (Compulsory acquisition of land)

The Chairperson: The clause was discussed in closed session before the departmental officials entered the meeting. The Committee Clerk has recommended acceptance of the clause based on the legal advice received. Do Members have any specific questions or comments that they wish to put to the Department?

Mr Elliott: I accept that the Department has moved quite significantly on the clause, but I still have concerns. I assume that that is of no major surprise. As we have sought legal advice, is it possible to insert a subsection that states that the compulsory acquisition of land would occur only after all other avenues had been exhausted?

Mr Small: We considered that as well, Tom. However, I am not sure that we put that to the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) on the basis that we could anticipate with a fair degree of certainty how it might respond. We are pretty sure that the OLC's response would be that clause 5 powers are the powers of last resort. The Department would not even contemplate using clause 5 powers unless the clause 2 provisions had been exhausted. They would require us to negotiate with a landowner to seek to develop a lease arrangement or a right of way.

We could not go straight to clause 5, because we would fail on the Wednesbury reasonableness test under local law, and we would fail the human rights test of reasonableness and proportionality. Clause 5 powers could not be used unless a proper, reasonable process of seeking to acquire land by agreement had been followed. We felt that the OLC would not even contemplate the inclusion of such a subsection, because —

The Chairperson: You are stressing to us that those powers are a last resort.

Mr Small: Yes; absolutely.

The Chairperson: I draw members' attention to clause 2(1), which we have already agreed to, which states: "The Department may—

(a) acquire by agreement any land which it requires".

The operative words for us are "by agreement".

Mr Elliott: Although David says that the powers would be used only as a last resort, there is

nothing in the Bill to indicate that. Although the Department may feel that legislation or the courts may be against it if it used clause 5 powers not as a last resort, there is nothing in the Bill to indicate that that would be the case. The legislation still allows for the compulsory, permanent acquisition of land, and although I am not happy with that, I may be able to live with it if something was included in the clause to state that the powers would be used only as a last resort. I keep coming back to the point that if the wording is not in the Bill, it is not in it.

Mr Small: My feeling is that if we go to it with that suggestion, the OLC will say that is taken as read that clause 5 powers cannot be used unless all other reasonable steps have been taken. We can put your concern to the OLC, Tom, if you so require, because we have not yet formally done so.

The Chairperson: It is fair that we raise the issue with the OLC in order to get a definitive position.

Mr Michael McCann (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): We have not yet put it to the OLC, but we will do so. The OLC said that we are obliged to explore the alternative before we use that power, and the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) said that we can engage in compulsory acquisition only if we first take steps that constitute the lowest level of interference.

The Chairperson: It is only fair that we ask you to take the point to the OLC to get advice. Our legal advice is clear. It states that what we have been able to negotiate with you over the past month brings us closer to the position that we want. However, that line is not included in the Bill. The trajectory is good, but if you put that point to the OLC, that might be sufficient to alleviate all concerns. What I am particularly struck by is that the proposed power is about right to access now, whereas previously it was a much more open issue. If we can have clarity on the point that the Deputy Chairperson raised, it would help members considerably.

Mr Small: We will check that point.

Mr Elliott: If the OLC were to say that it is taken as read that it is a last resort, it would be useful if it could give us some explanation of why it is taken as read. If there is some other piece of legislation that —

Mr Small: I think that it is in domestic common law. The Wednesbury reasonableness

requirement requires the Department to act reasonably. Moreover, human rights legislation, which requires the Department to have exhausted all other reasonable approaches first, would apply.

The Chairperson: That means that we will have put the Question on clause 5 tomorrow. I am just giving you notice of that.

Mr Shannon: Last Monday, we discussed the idea of the lease process. In other words, before the Department can compulsorily acquire land, there is the possibility of the Department's seeking a long-term or short-term lease. I know that it does not say that in the clause, but can we have some indication that the Department is agreeable to that term and methodology of coming to an agreement with the landowner, should there be any problem?

Mr Small: I think that the Department would be agreeable to that. A further amendment to clause 5 has been suggested to indicate that that could be for a limited period. The OLC has suggested the inclusion of a new subsection (1A), which states: "The power of acquiring land compulsorily under subsection (1) includes power to acquire, by the creation of a new right, an easement or other right over land."

What we are being told is that the compulsory power provided for in clause 5 allows the Department to do any one of those combinations. The Committee's concern until now has been that the Bill does not state that. However, the OLC's view is that it does not need to, because, again, it is taken as read.

The Chairperson: It is by agreement. In other words, there must be negotiation.

Mr Shannon: I appreciate that.

Dr W McCrea: I understand the first part of what you say, whereby clause 2(1) states that any land acquired must be done by agreement, but we are not talking about something that is done by agreement. The compulsory purchase of land is not by agreement. It takes us into a completely different field.

I stress what Tom said. I would like clarification that that does mean that compulsory purchase should be used as a last resort. I appreciate that the powers will be narrowed, and that they are in the Bill to improve access to land, and therefore the capacity to use those powers is narrowed. However, it is vital that the clause be

made clear. If it cannot be included in the Bill that the power will be used only as a last resort, we want to know why not. If what you are saying is correct, we need a very clear statement from you of what exactly the clause means. That way, the Department can be reminded of what it is saying: that it is a power of last resort. A major power has been handed to the Department, although it has limited scope. It is important to realise that, although its usage will generally be fine, it may not be fine for people whose land is going to be taken from them.

Mr Small: We appreciate those concerns.

The Chairperson: We need to have clarity on that point by tomorrow. I know that the OLC normally works in months, but if it could work in hours, that would be handy for us. I am sure the OLC is not listening to this. I stress that, originally, the proposed power provided to the Department was of an absolute right to acquire, and it will be reduced to being a limited power. We have done some good work on clause 5, and commendations are appropriate all round, both for Committee members and departmental officials, for getting the provision limited to powers to improve access. If we could get that definition clear, it would go a long way to satisfying the Committee. You have your work cut out for you with the OLC. Therefore, we will postpone putting the Question on clause 5 until tomorrow.

Clause 5 referred for further consideration.

Clause 6 (Inquiries, information, etc.)

The Chairperson: An amendment has been proposed to clause 6 to include the keeping of a woodland inventory, which will be reviewed at 10-year intervals, following a baseline assessment in the first year.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 6, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 7 (Incidental powers)

The Chairperson: An amendment has been proposed to clause 7 to allow similar procedures to be introduced under clause 4.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 7, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 8 (Control of animals in forests)

The Chairperson: An amendment has been proposed to clause 8 to exclude animals listed in schedule 5 to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and to remove the potential for night shooting. The Committee has done some good work on the clause.

Mr Savage: Are badgers protected in the clause? That is an important issue.

The Chairperson: Only deer and hare.

Do you want to be able to shoot badgers at night? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Savage: I think that we should be able to.

It is important that we have something in the clause that —

The Chairperson: We are not allowed to shoot them at any time.

Mr Savage: I know; I would not do that.

The Chairperson: I will not be facetious. The issue that George raised is covered by the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, which is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment.

Mr Savage: I ask because it could be important if there were a big outbreak of bovine TB or brucellosis, and a set of badgers needed to be rooted out. I hope that that situation does not arise.

Dr W McCrea: Have we dealt with the correspondence from the British Deer Society?

The Committee Clerk: That will be covered when the Committee moves on to clause 9.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 8, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 9 (Control of animals on land adjacent to forest)

The Chairperson: Clause 9 is a substantive clause. The Committee asked Forest Service to

reserve the clause and proposed the option of enabling the clause by subordinate legislation, or the appropriate legal trigger, when deer populations pose a greater threat than they do at present. Thankfully, Forest Service agreed to an amendment, and clause 9 will be retained in the Bill in dormant form.

That means that an amendment has been proposed to clause 38 that provides for clause 9, or any of its provisions, to be activated if they are ever required, but only if a draft Order is laid before the Assembly and approved by a resolution. Therefore, the Department would have to come back to the Assembly to trigger the provisions in the clause.

A further amendment has been proposed to the clause to remove the liability for charging adjacent landowners for kills, but the ability to charge other forest owners has been retained.

Dr McCrea asked about the correspondence that we have received on deer from the British Deer Society. Members have that correspondence in their blue folders. We plan to have clause 9 remain dormant so that the Department has to come back to the Assembly to activate it if the provisions in it are required. Therefore, we have probably addressed the society's concerns.

Mr Elliott: Is there no need to refer to clause 38 in clause 9?

Mr Small: Clause 38 is not mentioned in clause 9 because of drafting protocol. Clause 38 clearly indicates the dormant nature of clause 9.

Mr Elliott: I know that, but if one reads clause 9 on its own, no reference is made to clause 38.

Mr Small: You will probably find a lot of cross-references, even on regulations that are to be made. There is no indication of how they will be made until one gets to the clause 34, which talks about making regulations. That clause refers back to earlier clauses. If we were to do what you ask, we would need to include cross-references in quite a few clauses.

Mr Shannon: The British Deer Society wrote to us to ask who would cull deer. I mentioned in Committee previously that there is tourism potential and sporting potential here, which could be used as a method of control. I do not think that that is mentioned anywhere in the clause, although I may have missed it.

I have never shot a deer in my life, but it is one of my ambitions before I pass away. I am aware of the recreational value, the tourism potential and the money that can be generated from shooting deer. Does the clause mention recreational deerstalkers? If it does not, perhaps it should.

The Chairperson: The clause will lie dormant, but if, at some time in future, the population increases and there are galloping wildebeests and wild deer running across the plains of Ulster that require to be shot and put down at will, we will be able to address the issue then. The Department has conceded considerable ground and recognises that it is not a problem at present, but, when it becomes a problem, we will have to address it.

Mr Shannon: There could be some potential at that time.

The Chairperson: An Order will need to be laid in the House that will be subject to affirmative resolution. Therefore, it is not a minor thing.

Mr Shannon: I am perfectly satisfied with that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 9, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 10 (Removal or destruction of vegetation on adjoining land)

The Chairperson: The Department has proposed an amendment to clause 10, which will now contain a new paragraph to allow scope and flexibility, and measures other than removal or destruction of vegetation. The OLC has also attached a caveat to the clause for those who are committed to agrienvironment schemes and whose grant may be compromised by any clause 10 actions. The OLC was of the view that it would be unreasonable for the Department to seek to claw back grant on the grounds that a landowner had done something required by the Department under statutory powers and that nothing express will be required to that effect. The Department can also confirm that the principle of force majeure applies to those schemes. That will also offer protection in those circumstances. Is that a fair summary?

Mr M McCann: Yes, it is. We asked the OLC to write a caveat into the Bill, but it said

that there was no need because of the force majeure principle and because of the fact that it would be unreasonable for the Department to claw back any money from compromised agrienvironment schemes by virtue of another wing of the Department's serving a notice on the landowner. That is more or less as you summed up the case, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: We came across that as a result of the early scrutiny. Again, it indicates the good work that the Committee has done in identifying issues along with the Department.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 10, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Mr Elliott: Has the definition of "uncultivated land" been taken from the Department?

Mr Small: It has been taken from the dictionary. We discussed it at last week's meeting. We asked the OLC whether it would be possible to define "uncultivated land", and the advice was that it was unnecessary. It is the dictionary definition, which is "land that has not been cultivated". It was as simple as that. There are other statutory definitions, but they confuse matters more. The OLC's strong view was to use the dictionary definition, and that it was not necessary to give a further definition.

Mr Elliott: I can see huge problems in that area in the future.

The Chairperson: I hope that you are wrong, because we have just agreed to the clause.

Clause 11 (Protection for persons acting under section 8, 9 or 10)

The Chairperson: Clause 11 is not as live as the others. An amendment has been amended to provide protection for officers who are undertaking official duties as detailed in clauses 8 and 10 in particular.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 11, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clauses 12 and 13 agreed to.

Clause 14 (Requirement of licence for felling)

Mr Elliott: We were shown a draft of a felling licence.

Mr Small: It was a felling plan.

Mr Elliott: A felling plan, yes. I think it was a management plan. There is no legislative basis for that, and no legislative basis would be needed to change it. I appreciate that we were shown a simple plan that would be acceptable to everyone, but I am concerned about changes to that if they are required.

Mr M McCann: The content of the management plans will be prescribed by subordinate legislation. The Committee will have an input into the development of those plans.

Mr Elliott: So the plan requires subordinate legislation?

Mr M McCann: That is correct.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 14 agreed to.

Clauses 15 and 16 agreed to.

Clause 17 (Operation and conditions of felling licence)

The Chairperson: An amendment has been proposed to include a reference to the maintenance of ancient woodlands, although the Bill provides no definition of “ancient woodland”. The Department will, hopefully, be able to apprise members that it intends to use the definition that is provided by the UK forestry standard and other documentation. Is that right?

Mr Small: That is right. OLC took the view that “ancient woodland” is a well-understood term in forestry circles and that it is unnecessary to apply a definition in the Bill.

The Chairperson: At least now we can turn to a recognised authority on that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 17, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clauses 18 and 19 agreed to.

Clause 20 (Fees in connection with felling licences)

The Chairperson: The Committee has taken a very strong line on clause 20. We do not want to see fees anywhere near it. Given that we are nearing the eleventh hour, do you have anything to say about fees?

Mr Small: We have taken account of the Committee's views and have recently secured the Department of Finance and Personnel's agreement to waive fees for felling licences.

Now, the Committee had also expressed concern about the retention of the clause. Our position is that it is Executive policy that Departments should seek to recover costs where appropriate. We accept the Committee's concerns and do not feel that fees are appropriate at this stage. We reached that determination largely on the basis that the main benefit of the felling licensing system is a wider public benefit rather than any private individual gain.

However, if in five or 10 years' time the situation changes slightly, we will need the discretion to review it, perhaps at some future date. That means that some sort of clause like this needs to be retained. We know that the Committee is concerned about having that kind of clause in the Bill, and we propose that the clause remain in the Bill, but that any fees regulations that subsequently come forward should have to be approved by affirmative rather than negative resolution procedure.

The Chairperson: Is that similar to what we have agreed for clause 9?

Mr Small: Yes. It is so that the fees can be set only with the full consent of the Assembly.

The Chairperson: That goes an awfully long way to meet the Committee requirements. Organisations such as ConFor, which try to make a living out of forestry, will be delighted. I welcome the fact that you are waiving the fees, and that, if the Department wants to bring them in at a later date, you will first get the Assembly's authority. I do not think that we can ask for much more, except a cherry on top.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 20 agreed to.

Clauses 21 to 33 agreed to.

Clause 34 (Regulations)

The Chairperson: This clause refers back to clause 20, and makes it subject to affirmative resolution procedure.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 34, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clauses 35 to 37 agreed to.

Clause 38 (Commencement)

The Chairperson: This clause refers to clause 9, and makes it subject to affirmative resolution. The Committee sought that protection.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 38, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 39 agreed to.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: That concludes the clause-by-clause scrutiny, with the exception of clause 5. If we can get answers on that by tomorrow, we will be able to complete the process; if we can get over that bump in the road, we will have done a fairly good piece of work collectively on this Bill. I appreciate that you and your colleagues have been in listening mode for this Bill. We have kicked some of these issues about, but we have got over the line with them. The Committee appreciates the hard work that has gone into it.

Mr Savage: It is important, when all is said and done, that there is a living forest. That is in everyone's interest.

Mr Shannon: It is refreshing to have worked with officials who are responsive to the Committee. We all appreciate the Department's co-operation.

The Chairperson: You will be getting an OBE if you are not careful, David.

Mr Small: I just want to raise one issue before we finish.

The Chairperson: Maybe you already have one.

Mr Small: We talked about clause 9. The Department has accepted that it should remain dormant in the Bill with an enabling provision for some later date. We put a proposal to the Committee on Friday paper to add another clause to the Bill. That clause would be similar to clause 9 but, rather than having a compulsory nature, its provisions would only be used with the consent of the landowner. Our reasoning is that, although we were content to allow clause 9 to remain dormant at this time, on the basis of the Committee's comments, we feel that there would be circumstances in the future in which it would be helpful if the Department could go onto adjacent land with the landowner's agreement. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Shannon: Vote?

The Chairperson: That is possibly a vote.

Unless we see it, we cannot do anything with it. Can you bring it to us tomorrow?

Mr Small: We presented it on Friday. Perhaps the Committee Clerk and I can have a chat about it.

The Chairperson: We will look at it tomorrow.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

23 February 2010

Forestry Bill (NIA 11/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr (Chairperson)
Mr Tom Elliott (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr William Irwin
Dr William McCrea
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Savage
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Mr Michael McCann	}	<i>Department of Agriculture and Rural Development</i>
Mr John Joe O'Boyle		
Mr David Small		

The Chairperson (Mr Paisley Jnr): I welcome to the meeting David Small, John Joe O'Boyle and Michael McCann. Mr Morwood is not with you today. Have we worn him out?

Mr David Small (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Yes.

Mr Elliott: I again declare an interest as a landowner.

The Chairperson: OK. Following legal advice, it was considered that although there was scope for clause-by-clause amendments, we will go straight to clause 5, which deals with compulsory acquisition.

Clause 5 (Compulsory acquisition of land)

The Chairperson: We had a detailed discussion about clause 5 yesterday. Is there anything that you want to put to us before we hear members' views?

Mr Small: I reaffirm that the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) and the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) came back to us yesterday and advised that it would not be appropriate to insert a clause indicating that the clause 5 powers would only be used as a last resort. I think that members have a copy of that advice.

OLC and DSO advise very strongly against doing that for a whole range of reasons, one of which is that that does not exist, to their knowledge, anywhere else. They made the point that it is important that all compulsory purchase powers be exercised and expressed in the same way in statute to retain uniformity. There is a very strong view that whenever compulsory purchase powers are being considered, that will always be after all other options have been exhausted. That is described by our legal people in DSO as being a matter of course. Against that background, the strong advice is that it is inappropriate to include that kind of clause.

The Chairperson: Could you publish on the website your administrative guidance showing the processes that have to be undertaken if there is to be compulsory acquisition? That would mean that people would see that the Department has to go through clause 2 and show all of the negotiations. It is only as a very last resort that the Department can move to clause 5, and what that entails in terms of Wednesbury reasonableness and having to go over all of the proper hurdles.

Mr Small: We could possibly do that.

The Chairperson: It would give the public certainty when they look at that.

Mr Small: It might look a bit odd on the website. We would need to establish just where it would sit in the website without sticking out like a sore thumb. One alternative is that the Minister, in her Consideration Stage speech, could refer explicitly to the issue and the steps that we will take before we even consider clause 5 provisions. I assume that that would be recorded and available in the Hansard report. The guidance might look a bit odd on the website.

The Chairperson: I certainly have no difficulty with the Minister making a detailed statement on the issues and giving the interpretation. However, there is an issue because the guidance could be published. I am sure that a suitable place on the website could be found, or there could be a reference to it in

documentation so that people know where they can get it and see what the administrative guidance is to the process of compulsory acquisition.

Mr Small: I hesitate because when we discussed the idea of a statutory code setting out the various procedural steps in statute, we were advised very strongly against that by our legal advisers.

The Chairperson: That is why I am talking about your administrative guidance as opposed to a statutory code.

Mr Small: The legal advice was that there was absolutely no reason why a Department should not have internal procedure that dictates clearly how it will deal with an issue. However, the more public that procedure is made, the more expectation it raises and the more substance it then carries in respect of potential legal challenges. If that were done, it would raise the whole prospect of a judicial review or legal challenge. I am not suggesting that is a reason for not doing it, but it puts the matter in a different arena.

The Chairperson: At this point, some transparency about the process and the guidance that you would follow is all that is being sought. That is a very small ask.

Mr Small: My only hesitation is around the legal advice. I have it in the back of my mind that the more public one makes the issue, the more difficulties are created.

Mr Elliott: However, the more public it is made, the less suspicious the public are.

Mr Small: I appreciate that, yes.

Mr Elliott: That is where we are coming from, and I agree with the Chairperson. I am automatically suspicious to hear that the Department has reservations about making the whole issue public on its website.

Mr Small: That is for legal reasons only, Tom. There are no other reasons.

Mr Elliott: Nobody is going to challenge you unless you take land off them first.

Mr Small: The DSO made that point. When and if a Department seeks to use its compulsory purchase powers, it moves into a strongly contested legal arena in which protection is afforded by the Human Rights Act 1998 and

by domestic law. There is every chance of a challenge, and the more information that is public the stronger that challenge will be. In practice, I have no difficulty with the idea of the information being on the website, other than my concern about that legal advice.

Mr John Joe O'Boyle (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): It comes down to the level of detail that might be put on the website, because the DSO also advised us that every case was a bit different and, for example, different administrative procedures are brought to bear in different circumstances. Thus, it is difficult to have a best-fit administrative procedure that covers all circumstances. Part of the difficulty is that the Department would have to explore the approach to be taken in each and every set of circumstances. Legal difficulties arise from it not being easy to have a catch-all administrative process.

Mr Small: The Department was also advised that its internal procedure would have to change from time to time. Therefore, an internal procedure now might differ from an internal procedure that predated the Human Rights Act 1998. Human rights legislation means that our present internal procedure is very different.

Mr Elliott: I do not accept any of that argument. All that the Department has to do is update its advice on the website for the public's information. I must say that I have had difficulty with this clause the whole way through, and you are making me extremely suspicious. I am having enough difficulty coming round to accepting the Committee Clerk's advice on the matter without you making it more difficult.

Mr Small: I am not trying to make it difficult, Tom. Before I give a commitment in Hansard, I am thinking through the issues in my head and reflecting on some of the legal advice. Having done so, I think that, on balance, the Department would be content to put some information on the website that will set out the very obvious steps that must be taken before we even consider using clause 5, including all the clause 2 opportunities, the negotiations with the landowner and our attempt to acquire the land by agreement. That is the kind of information that will be set out, all of which is consistent with our responsibilities and obligations under the 1998 Act and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). I see no difficulty with that, because we must meet and pursue those

obligations and procedures anyway. Therefore, Chairman, I am content to give a commitment on that.

Mr Shannon: There you are, Tom. You dragged that out of him.

Mr Elliott: Was the advice from the OLC and the DSO given orally or in writing?

Mr Small: It was in writing. We reflected it in a note to the Committee Clerk.

Mr Elliott: Had we received that before today, Committee Clerk?

The Committee Clerk: No, but it is in today's Committee papers.

Dr W McCrea: Welcome, gentlemen. To be quite honest, you are fumbling around for an excuse here and you are doing a very bad job.

Mr Small: We have agreed to do it.

Dr W McCrea: You are certainly not convincing. You tell us that it would look odd, but it would not be the first odd thing to appear on the Department's website. To claim that it might be odd or a wee bit strange is no reason to keep it off. What is being asked is the weakest possible manner of moving forward on the issue; it is the weakest request possible. Either it is the last resort or it is not.

The Chairperson: I do not think that it was offered.

Dr W McCrea: Either it is the last resort or it is not. I am becoming increasingly suspicious that the Department is fumbling around. I do not doubt your legal advice but listen, folks: transparency is a wonderful thing.

Mr Small: I agree.

Dr W McCrea: If you look at it carefully, transparency will do the Department good, not harm.

Mr Small: I agree with that, and I have agreed that we will publish the information on the website.

Mr Shannon: You are browbeaten.

Dr W McCrea: No, he is not.

Mr Molloy: I have missed some of this, but the attitude seems to be the same as it was when I was last here. My concern is that, rather than it being the last option, this is, too often, the first option that the Department takes. There seems

to be a reluctance to say that the legislation exists and a view that it would be dangerous for people to know about it. That smacks of the Department trying to cod people about its long-term intentions. The public should know what options are available to them. It is ridiculous to try to hide information to prevent someone from taking a case.

The other side of the story is how flexible the Department would be in a reverse situation, where someone else wanted communication or co-operation from Forest Service regarding adjacent land that he or she owns. Perhaps the Department would not be that flexible either. The public need to be aware of their rights, and their rights should not be denied. If human rights legislation is a problem for the Department, it is time that the Department examined that.

Mr Small: Human rights legislation is not a problem for us at all. I have agreed that we will publish the information on the website. I have to be careful to consider all the legal implications of giving that commitment, but I am satisfied —

The Chairperson: It shows that there has not been anything cooked up between us, David. There is no reason for suspicion.

Mr Small: Absolutely. I fully support the benefits of transparency; there is no question about that. We must meet the full obligations of the 1998 Act and the European Convention on Human Rights, and I have no difficulty with that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 5, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

The Chairperson: The matter is closed at this point, but there will be an opportunity for us to debate all the points that have been raised on the Floor of the House and for that to be recorded in the Hansard report. That will also provide the Minister with a platform to reiterate that this approach will be used only as a last resort, as you indicated that she was keen to do.

New Clause (Control (with permission of occupier) of animals on land adjacent to a forest)

The Chairperson: At the meeting yesterday, the Department indicated that clause 8 will be

followed by the new clause. The new clause reflects a totally consensual approach that requests the occupier of adjoining land to take effective steps to prevent damage to adjoining woodland. Failing that, the Department may request permission to control the animals, but it has no power to enter without that permission. The Committee has been asked to note that the new clause contains no power to impose any costs on an owner of adjoining land even if, by agreement, the Department controls animals on his or her land. Is that a fair summary of your proposal, David?

Mr Small: Yes. It is based completely on permission from a landowner.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

New clause agreed to.

The Chairperson: That concludes the Committee Stage; is that right?

The Committee Clerk: No; that concludes the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill.

The Chairperson: Yes; that concludes the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. I was wondering there, because I did not think we had got that far.

I want to reiterate my appreciation for the work that you have done and, indeed, for the way in which we have tried to get this Bill over the line as effectively as possible. The Hard work has resulted in some beneficial changes.

Mr Small: I thank the Committee for its input and contribution. It has been a positive process, and it has been hard work. Hopefully, it will result in a Forestry Bill that we are all happy and comfortable with and that sets a statutory framework for the work that we will take forward in future.

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 12 February 2010

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Lifetime Opportunities Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 3509/10, when the action plan to implement Lifetime Opportunities will be available.

(AQW 4173/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): It will be the responsibility of the Executive Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion to agree the priorities and key Executive actions for tackling poverty and social inclusion here and also to agree the monitoring and reporting mechanisms associated with the 'Lifetime Opportunities' anti-poverty strategy.

Officials have already undertaken significant work with departments to examine the potential for further actions to benefit those in greatest objective need.

It is hoped these priority action areas along with the monitoring and reporting framework for 'Lifetime Opportunities' will be agreed at the third meeting of the Executive Sub-Committee due to be held early this year and then submitted for formal approval by the Executive.

Executive Papers

Mr G Savage asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the subject matter of each of the 173 papers that their Department referred to the Executive between May 2007 and 7 December 2009; and to state whether the Executive agreed each paper.

(AQW 4264/10)

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.

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an estimate of the percentage of their annual budget which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.

(AQW 4325/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Based on a broad interpretation of the question, it is estimated that 100% of the good relations budget within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures. Over the period 2008-11, approximately £29 million has been allocated towards the PSA target of a shared and better future for all. Total expenditure on good relations in 2008/09 was approximately £8.4 million.

We are fully committed to building a society that is free of sectarianism, racism and any form of intolerance. All of the work undertaken towards this aim can ultimately be seen as preventative and early intervention measures. By working on a daily basis to improve relationships on the ground and tackle intolerance we are helping to prepare the foundation for a shared and better future for all people here.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2

Mr G Savage asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if they can confirm that allocated funds for Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2 will be used for capital projects.

(AQW 4392/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Funding for Investment Strategy 2008-18 projects is provided by the Executive through its agreed Budget.

Capital allocations in the 2008-11 Budget include capital expenditure by departments, capital grants to the private sector and net lending to public corporations. All these avenues of expenditure will lead to the progression of the Executive's capital projects and are reflected in the Investment Strategy, which pertains only to such projects.

Executive Business

Mr G Savage asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of why it is in the public interest not to disclose information relating to Executive business.

(AQW 4461/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We would refer the Member to the answer provided on 9 November in relation to his previous question on Executive confidentiality.

Women's Sector Funding: Review

Ms J McCann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Review of Women's Sector Funding, including the membership of the Gender Advisory Panel and the Reference Group that are due to set the Terms of Reference and co-ordinate the Review.

(AQW 4493/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The interim review is underway and expects to report to the Executive later this year. The Steering Group have agreed draft Terms of Reference for consideration and approval by us, taking account of the views of a stakeholder reference group. This reference group, comprising volunteers from the Gender Advisory Panel, will meet again this month and will have an important advisory role to the Steering Group and will be consulted throughout the interim review.

Community Empowerment Partnerships

Mr N Dodds asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when funding will be distributed under the proposed new Community Empowerment Partnership scheme for North Belfast.

(AQO 667/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has provided just under £14 million to the North Belfast Community Action Unit for Community Capacity Building Programmes in North Belfast since 2003.

The purpose of the Programme, delivered through Community Empowerment Partnerships, was to enable communities to build leadership to better manage relations within and between neighbouring communities and to develop networks to be able to better deal with issues which affect their areas.

In October 2009, Junior Ministers Newton and Kelly outlined the strategic direction for future funding of the programme. This will build on the previous experience and will be delivered through the themes of leadership, citizenship and good relations.

Officials from the North Belfast Community Action Unit have been consulting extensively with the Community Empowerment Partnerships on the operational detail of the new programme. Applications have been requested by 22nd February 2010 with the aim of funding decisions being made in March 2010. Current CEP funding will continue until the new Programme is operational.

Policing and Justice Powers

Mr A Attwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on developments and discussions on the devolution of policing and justice.

(AQO 671/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Member will be aware that an agreement was announced at Hillsborough Castle on Friday 5 February.

In relation to the devolution of policing and justice, the Agreement states that, following community consultation, the First Minister and deputy First Minister will table jointly a resolution for a cross community vote in this Assembly on 9 March. Following affirmation of the resolution, we will support all necessary steps in the Assembly to ensure devolution of powers by 12 April 2010.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr A Maskey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to meet with the Chair and CEO of the Strategic Investment Board to monitor the Executive's Investment Strategy, in light of the current economic situation and the recent announcement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel of budget cuts for the 2010/11 financial year.

(AQO 672/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We corresponded with the Strategic Investment Board on 4 January with a view to arranging a meeting with its directors, including its Chairman and Chief Executive, as soon as diaries permit.

Our officials are in continual contact with SIB and advise us on a wide range of relevant issues including the Investment Strategy, the Review of the Capital Realisations Taskforce and the construction industry.

Victims and Survivors' Service

Mr G Savage asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the analysis of responses to the consultation on the Proposed Victims and Survivors Service will be completed; and if any trends have emerged from the analysis to date.

(AQO 674/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Officials have analysed the responses and given a presentation to the Committee for OFMDFM on the key points arising.

Emerging themes include the design of the Service, the introduction of a three-year funding cycle for groups, the comprehensive needs assessment and the Non-Departmental Public Body model proposed for the Victims and Survivors Service.

OFMDFM: Research Branch

Mr F Cobain asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what research is currently being carried out under the Equality and Social Needs Research programme within the Research Branch of their Department; and what new policy initiatives have resulted from the work of the Research Branch in the last two years.

(AQO 675/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Research Branch of the Equality Directorate currently provides direct research and statistical support to both the Equality, Rights and Social Need Division, and to the Good Relations and Reconciliation Division.

In relation to the Equality, Rights and Social Need Division, the cross-Departmental Equality and Social Need Research and Information Strategy 2009-2011 is designed to enhance the information and research base upon which equality and social need policies are developed and evaluated.

The majority of the work of the Research Branch within the Equality, Rights and Social Need Division relates to the provision of direct support in connection with Divisional policy responsibilities. That work entails the routine provision of research and statistical analyses and advice to policy officials and to Ministers, liaising and working as appropriate with professional statistical and research colleagues across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, the UK Civil Service, the broader public sector, Academia, non-Departmental Public bodies, and the voluntary, community and independent research sectors.

In addition to this provision of support, a number of discrete Equality and Social Need research and statistical projects are taken forward every year in response to policy priorities identified by Ministers, and in line with the Equality and Social Need Research and Information Strategy. Projects being taken forward currently comprise a mixture of internal research and statistical work and externally commissioned research including:

Current internal research and statistical work

- The development of a monitoring framework for the 'Lifetime Opportunities' strategy the Northern Ireland Executive's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy.
- Statistical and research literature review on the causes, consequences and international perspectives of the gender pay gap.
- Analysis of individual outcomes over time utilising the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) focused on those population categories identified under Section 75.
- Development of a Ministerial paper on options for the measurement of severe child poverty.
- Statistical overview of the potential impact of the removal of concessionary fees for Further Education for older people.
- Identification and development of key area baseline information in relation to the Older People's Strategy.

Current externally commissioned research

- Research on causes and consequences of cognitive, behavioural, educational and health outcomes for disadvantaged young children in Northern Ireland at age 5.
- Transphobic hate crime.
- Economic appraisal of options for the provision of childcare.

Research Branch is responsible for providing research and statistical support to the development, implementation and evaluation of Ministerial identified policies and strategies. As such, the work of Research Branch is driven by the work of all the Business Areas within the Equality, Rights and Social Need Division. Over the past two years, policy developments of note which have illustrated the contribution of Research Branch include:

- The implementation and development of 'Lifetime Opportunities'.
- The development of a monitoring framework for 'Lifetime Opportunities'.
- The development of the UK Child Poverty Bill in respect of the responsibilities identified for the devolved administrations.
- The work of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on disability and the production of the evidence base in the accompanying report.
- The implementation and monitoring of the Gender Equality Strategy.
- Facilitating and supporting the work of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion.
- Facilitating and supporting the Child Poverty Sub Group.
- Draft Bill and consultation document on the appointment of a commissioner for older people.

Maze Site

Rt Hon J Donaldson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made in establishing a development corporation to take forward the regeneration of the Maze site.

(AQO 676/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: A draft Statutory Rule to establish the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation was considered by the OFMDFM Committee on 14 October and 25 November 2009 and approved for passage to the Assembly for debate. A date for the Assembly debate will be scheduled as soon as possible.

Victims and Survivors' Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the possible creation of a non-departmental public body for the proposed Victims and Survivors Service.

(AQO 677/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are currently considering the option of creating a Non Departmental Public Body to administer the new Victims and Survivors Service.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Civil Servants: Flights

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural 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 3931/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Flights are booked in DARD by 2 methods: by the business area directly with the airline (usually with 'budget' airlines), or through the appointed travel agent.

For all flights, whatever the booking method, the department has not kept records of the numbers of flights booked but never used, or any subsequent costs and loss of revenue. A small number of business areas have reported that, anecdotally the number of flights never used is minimal.

Flights booked through the appointed travel agent may be refundable in full or in part, if cancelled, ie there may be no loss or a partial loss. Flights booked direct with the airline are not normally refundable unless the flight is cancelled by the airline.

Civil Servants: Hotels

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural 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 3932/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD business areas arrange their own hotel bookings. Hotel bills are paid direct by business areas, or by staff who reclaim costs via their travel expense claims. The department has not kept records of the number of nights booked but never used, or any subsequent costs or loss of revenue. A small number of business areas have reported that anecdotally the number of hotel nights never used is minimal.

For the period 2005/06 to 2008/09 hotel costs were reported as part of generic subsistence costs, including hotels, daily subsistence, overnight subsistence, etc. Hotel costs are not readily extractable from this data.

From 2009/10, hotel costs are separately identifiable. For the period April 2009 to January 2010, the total hotel costs were £70,614. No records have been kept of the number of nights booked but never used, or any subsequent costs or loss of revenue against this figure.

EU Grants for Storage Facilities for Poultry Litter

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the poultry industry did not take advantage of the EU grants made available for the construction of storage facilities for poultry litter, given that grants were made available and secured by farmers for the construction of storage facilities for slurry from pig and cattle livestock.

(AQW 4139/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Grants were made available through my Department's Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) for slurry and manure storage facilities, including poultry manure and poultry litter. The scheme was funded from national monies and there was no EU funding element.

Some poultry farmers did avail of the FNMS grant. Those who did not may have already had sufficient livestock manure storage facilities or could meet the requirements of the Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) Regulations by storing poultry litter in temporary field heaps.

Prior to implementation of the NAP Regulations in 2007, it was recognised by poultry industry representatives that land spreading of poultry litter is not sustainable at current levels in the long term due to environmental constraints. Therefore, a consortium within the industry proposed to develop a technical alternative to land spreading.

As land spreading is not the long term option identified by the industry, many poultry farmers did not apply for the FNMS grant to invest in permanent facilities to store poultry litter.

EU Grants for Storage Facilities for Poultry Litter

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development who took the decision, within her Department or elsewhere, not to use EU grants for the construction of storage facilities for poultry litter to ensure poultry farmers comply with the Nitrates Directive.

(AQW 4140/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: All livestock farmers were eligible to apply to my Department's Farm Nutrient Management Scheme for assistance to comply with the Nitrates Directive. The scheme provided grant support for slurry and manure storage facilities, including those for poultry litter and poultry manure.

As poultry farmers were eligible to apply to the scheme, decisions not to avail of the grant aid were taken by poultry farmers.

The scheme was funded entirely from national monies and some £120million in grant aid has been provided. There was no EU funding of the scheme.

Adequate livestock manure storage capacity is only one of the requirements for compliance with the Nitrates Directive.

Damage to Crops by the Recent Severe Weather

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department will conduct an assessment of the level of damage caused to crops and the consequences for the farming industry caused by the recent severe weather.

(AQW 4147/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am well aware that the recent severe weather has caused great difficulties to the farming community and my heart goes out to all those affected.

Currently there are no financial support measures available for the farming industry and in order not to raise expectations, my Department has not assessed the level of damage loss at this time.

I do however intend to make representations to Executive colleagues at the earliest opportunity, and if agreement can be reached and money found, I will direct officials to assess the damage and resulting financial loss suffered by the farming industry from the recent severe weather.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the Farm Modernisation Scheme will be open for the next tranche of applications.

(AQW 4151/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I will open the second tranche of the Farm Modernisation Programme later this year after consulting with industry representatives about updating the List of Eligible Items and completing a review of the explanatory documentation from the first tranche.

New Countryside Management Programme

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the New Countryside Management Programme will commence.

(AQW 4152/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The new Countryside Management Scheme and Organic Farming Scheme opened for applications in 2008 and approximately 1000 new agreements were established with farmers from 1 January 2009. These are in addition to the 11700 existing agreement holders that are being funded through the current Rural Development Plan.

In August 2009 I announced that the Countryside Management Scheme would open again in early 2010. DARD officials are currently working on delivery procedures and associated communication requirements to ensure that the second opening period will go ahead within this timescale.

Supermarket Ombudsman

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to appoint a 'Supermarket Ombudsman' to ensure farmers across Northern Ireland receive fair prices for their produce.

(AQW 4159/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The appointment of a 'Supermarket Ombudsman' is a reserved matter under the NI Act 1998 and therefore not within my remit. However, I do agree with the concept of fair pricing and welcome the British Government's acceptance in principle of the need for an Ombudsman. Also, the recent announcement that it will now consult on the nature of such a body and what powers it might have as it enforces the Groceries Supply Code of Practice is a significant step forward. I believe that all links in the food chain are dependant on each other and that it is important for retailers to recognise that in the long run it is in their interests, and their customers' interests, to have a sustainable local based supply chain. I, like you, want to see farmers receiving a good price for their produce.

Integrated Area Control System Payments

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmers eligible for Integrated Area Control System payments; and the number of payments made so far in this financial year.

(AQW 4203/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As at 31 January 2010, 38,475 of the 38,699 farm businesses who made a 2009 SFP application are currently considered as eligible for SFP. The number of eligible SFP claims for the 2009 scheme year is subject to change on an ongoing basis as

applications continue to be fully validated. As at 31 January 2010, 35,213 farmers have been paid their 2009 Single Farm Payment.

2009 Aid for Energy Crop Scheme (ECS)

As at 31 January 2010, all of the 55 farm businesses who made a 2009 ECS application are currently considered as eligible for ECS. The number of eligible ECS claims for the 2009 scheme year is subject to change on an ongoing basis as applications continue to be fully validated. As at 31 January 2010, 46 farmers have been paid their 2009 Aid for Energy Crops.

2009 Protein Crop Premium (PCP)

As at 31 January 2010, all of the 38 farm businesses who made a 2009 PCP application are currently considered as eligible for PCP. The number of eligible PCP claims for the 2009 scheme year is subject to change on an ongoing basis as applications continue to be fully validated. As at 31 January 2010, 32 farmers have been paid their 2009 Protein Crop Premium.

2010 Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances (LFACA)

14,644 farmers applied for the 2010 for the LFACA scheme. It is not possible at this stage to say how many of these are eligible. We aim to start LFACA payments in mid-February 2010.

2009 Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) and Organic Farming Scheme (OFS)

In 2009-10, the number of farmers who were eligible to submit a claim for the CMS was 943 and 33 for the OFS. We aim to commence payments in February 2010.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many applications have been received under the Farm Modernisation Scheme; (ii) how many applicants have received funding through this scheme; and (iii) how much funding has been allocated to date.

(AQW 4206/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) 9,271 applications were received under Tranche 1 of the Farm Modernisation Programme (FMP).
- (ii) 1,268 applicants received Letters of Offer of financial support.
- (iii) £6.76m in funding has been allocated in Letters of Offer and as of 22 January 2010, payments totalling £2.28m have been made.

Dairy Farms: Average Income

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the average income of a dairy farm (i) in 2000; (ii) in 2005; and (iii) for the most recent date available.

(AQW 4214/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The average Farm Business Income for dairy farms recorded in the Farm Business Survey in 2000/01 was £21,265; in 2005/06 it was £28,664; and in 2008/09 (the most recent year available) it was £37,520.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development 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 4231/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: You will be aware from a previous written answer that DARD has no formal role within the Investing for Health Strategy but that the Department does take every opportunity to promote awareness of health issues. In particular our Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion framework is contributing to the elimination of poverty and reduction of social exclusion in rural areas. This work includes initiatives to address health and wellbeing related issues such as tackling fuel poverty, providing rural childcare facilities and enhancing rural transport services to vulnerable groups such as those with a disability.

As regards meetings within the last year I can confirm that no meetings or discussions have taken place with DHSSPS to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health Strategy.

Golden Box and Angus Bonus

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the payment regulations that apply when a slaughtered beef animal qualifies for both a Golden Box bonus and an Angus bonus; and if she can confirm that neither bonus is subject to a reduction because of the other's existence.
(AQW 4240/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Golden Box and Angus bonus schemes are operated by the north of Ireland Beef Processors and DARD is not involved.

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development 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 4248/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- i) My department does not have any on-line systems for the payment of DARD goods and services.
- ii) No on-line transactions were processed for goods and services in the last 5 years.
- iii) No on-line transactions were paid by other payment methods.
- iv) The percentage of payments made on-line compared to other payment methods is zero.

Executive Papers

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the subject matter of each of the 26 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 4271/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural 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.

Rivers Agency: Drainage Study, Dromore Road

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the Rivers Agency's drainage study of the Dromore Road area of Banbridge.
(AQW 4320/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The most recent programme for the study indicates delivery date for a draft report by the end of May 2010. An estimated completion date for the study is therefore early July 2010 allowing time for the Agency to consider findings and finalise the report.

At this time land surveys in the study area are now complete, Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) surveys of culverts and pipelines are underway and the study team is beginning its computer modelling of the watercourses concerned.

Animals: Cruelty and Neglect

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department is doing to ensure animals are protected from cruelty and neglect.

(AQW 4351/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD takes an active role in educating livestock keepers in standards of welfare and carries out a programme of animal welfare surveillance.

Veterinary Service carries out routine on-farm inspections as a result of public complaints, information provided by Vets and within a programme of inspections which includes a random element as part of the cross compliance surveillance system.

All complaints and allegations of poor welfare on specific farms are treated as a matter of urgency. DARD also co-operates closely with other organisations such as PSNI and the USPCA.

Forestry and Woodland

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many hectares of land owned by her Department are unsuitable for planting forestry or woodland.

(AQW 4374/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are approximately 16,980 hectares of Department of Agriculture and Rural Development land which is unsuitable for planting forestry or woodland. At least 14,350 hectares of this overall total is land owned by DARD. The remainder includes up to 2,630 hectares which is secured by long term leases, i.e. which exceed 99 years.

Single Farm Payment

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the approximate cost to the Department of administering the Single Farm Payment.

(AQW 4484/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Single Farm Payment Scheme costs approximately £9m per year to administer.

Farm Modernisation Scheme: Manure Efficiency Technology Sub-programme

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the Farm Modernisation Scheme Manure Efficiency Technology sub-programme, to detail (i) the total funding allocation; (ii) how many applications were received; (iii) how many applications were approved; and (iv) how many successful applicants did not take up their approval.

(AQW 4579/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) A total of £ 1.68m was allocated to the Manure Efficiency Technology Sub Programme (METS);
- (ii) A total of 853 METS applications were received;
- (iii) A total of 176 METS applications received Letters of Offer for financial support;
- (iv) While all claims have not yet been received, to date 59 successful applicants have not taken up their approval.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) which goods and services provided by his Department can be paid for online; (ii) the total number of transactions processed by his 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 4289/10)**

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): The principal goods and services provided by my Department for which a charge is made are:

- Angling Permits
- Joint Fishing Licence/Angling Permits
- River Bush Salmon Fishing Day Tickets
- Search Fees, Reprographic Fees, Certification Fees (Public Records Office)

The Department has offered an online payment facility for the purchase of Angling Permits, Joint Fishing Licence/Angling Permits and River Bush Salmon Fishing Day Tickets since October 2005. The facility to pay online for goods and services provided by the Public Records Office is not available.

The requested information in respect of sales of Angling Permits and Joint Fishing Licence/Angling Permits in the past 5 years is listed in Table 1 below.

Table 2 below provides information on transaction numbers and online payments for the sale of River Bush Salmon Fishing Day Tickets. Details of other payment methods used for the purchase of these tickets are not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Information on transaction numbers and payment methods for goods and services provided by the Public Records Office is not readily available and the Department cannot obtain this information without disproportionate effort.

**TABLE 1 ANGLING PERMITS
JOINT FISHING LICENCE/ANGLING PERMIT**

Year	Total Transactions	Online Payments	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other
2005	3	3	0	0	0	0
2006	118	101	0	0	17	0
2007	289	275	3	2	9	0
2008	98	91	2	0	5	0
2009	239	220	4	0	15	0
Total	747	690	9	2	46	0

92% of all payments were made online in the years 2005 to 2009.

TABLE 2 RIVER BUSH SALMON FISHING DAY TICKETS

Year	Total Transactions	Online Payments
2005	99	26

Year	Total Transactions	Online Payments
2006	804	492
2007	1,767	1,227
2008	1,932	104
2009	1,627	463
Total	6,229	2,312

37% of all payments were made online in the years 2005 to 2009.

Orange Order

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the Orange Order chairing a recent meeting of two unionist political parties, for his assessment as to whether the Order is a solely religious and cultural organisation; and whether the Order will be eligible for funding from his Department.

(AQW 4421/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Orange Order is a cultural and religious body. However, it proactively lobbies on behalf of its members on issues of concern.

The Order is eligible for funding from DCAL.

Elite Facilities

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the budget for Elite Facilities in (i) 2007/08; (ii) 2008/09; and (iii) 2009/10; and the expenditure in each year.

(AQW 4503/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The opening budget allocations for the Elite Facilities Programme for the years 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10 and the expenditure for those years is shown in the table below:

	2007/08 £k	2008/09 £k	2009/10 £k
CSR allocation	Nil	3,000	3,700
Expenditure	Nil	381	830 (projected spend)

Library Closures

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money will be saved by the closure of each individual library.

(AQW 4564/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Libraries NI's strategic review of the Greater Belfast library estate is focussed on making the best use of the available resources to improve the effectiveness of Public Library Services in the City rather than on generating substantial efficiency savings.

The proposals from the review are currently out for public consultation and the Libraries NI Board have made no final decisions regarding the closure of any library. Libraries NI have extended the consultation period by 1 month (to 5 April 2010) to allow as many people as possible to contribute. I would encourage everyone with an interest to take part in the ongoing consultation.

In the longer term there will be limited savings from reduced running costs (utilities and rates) and ultimately some income from the sale of some of the library buildings which are no longer required. Any resources saved from the closure of a public library will be reinvested in improving library services elsewhere.

Most of the efficiencies released however will not have monetary value. Rather the resources saved (such as staff time, public access computers and stock) will be redeployed to improve services elsewhere in Belfast.

Libraries NI have provided a summary of the resources which would be released if each of the libraries under review were to close (Annex A).

Irish-Language Strategy

Mr G Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he will bring forward a draft strategy to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language.

(AQW 4575/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since coming into office at the beginning of July 2009, I have given special attention to the development of a minority languages strategy.

It is my intention to bring forward a draft strategy to the Executive by the end of March which can then go out to consultation.

One strand of this strategy will be to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language as set out in Section 28D of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews) Act 2006.

The preparation of this draft Minority Languages Strategy will require engagement with, and commitments from, a number of other Northern Ireland Executive departments - especially in relation to education - and from the United Kingdom government in relation to broadcasting.

Ulster-Scots Language Strategy

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he will bring forward a draft strategy to enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture.

(AQW 4597/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since coming into office at the beginning of July 2009, I have given special attention to the development of a minority languages strategy.

It is my intention to bring forward a draft strategy to the Executive by the end of March which can then go out to consultation.

One strand of this strategy will be to enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture as set out in Section 28D of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews) Act 2006.

The preparation of this draft Minority Languages Strategy will require engagement with, and commitments from, a number of other Northern Ireland Executive departments - especially in relation to education - and from the United Kingdom government in relation to broadcasting.

Library Closures

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of whether the the consultation process on library closures will result in meaningful community engagement, given that the consultation document runs to 32 pages yet the consultation period is less than two months.

(AQW 4629/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The public consultation on Libraries NI's vision for the Greater Belfast libraries estate commenced on 11 January 2010 and will finish on 5 April 2010. This is a standard 12 week consultation period. This consultation was initiated and agreed by the Board of

Libraries NI. The Libraries NI Board includes elected Councillors from DUP, SDLP, Sinn Féin and UUP all of whom were in agreement.

Libraries NI have also arranged 7 public meetings to provide opportunities for meaningful local community engagement. All the consultation documentation is available in branch libraries and on-line.

Libraries NI are proactively seeking the views of everyone on their proposals and no final decisions have been made on the closure of any library. I would encourage anyone with an interest in public libraries to contribute to this important process.

Department of Education

Review of Public Administration

Mr D Kennedy asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on her Department's implementation of the Review of Public Administration; (ii) if she 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 4109/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane):

- (i) De réir comhairlithe le comhghleacaithe ar an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, tá mé ag leanúint de dhul sa tóir ar achtú an Bhille Oideachais le bunú údaráis aonadaigh oideachais a éascú chun é a chur in ionad na mbord oideachais agus leabharlainne agus foras eile agus chun athruithe tábhachtacha a chur i bhfeidhm maidir leis an dóigh a mbainistítear scoileanna agus a dtacaítear le scoileanna.
- (i) In consultation with colleagues on the Executive, I am continuing to pursue the enactment of the Education Bill to enable the establishment of a unitary education authority to replace the education and library boards and some other bodies and to bring forward important changes to how schools are managed and supported.

Significant work has continued to create the Education and Skills Authority and the Chairperson (designate) and Chief Executive (designate) have produced a convergence delivery plan to assist the existing bodies with their efforts to achieve a smooth transition to the new arrangements. However, delays at the Executive have meant that it was not possible to achieve the proposed implementation date of 1 January 2010.

I am continuing to press the Executive for early consideration of the issues outstanding to allow me to seek a date for the Consideration Stage of the Bill.

- (ii) The level of RPA savings to be delivered in 2010/11 amount to £13 million and were originally predicated on the establishment of ESA on 1 April 2009. These savings have already been removed from the Education budget and thus any further delay in the establishment of ESA will require this financial loss to be addressed through alternative means.

In the absence of ESA, a convergence delivery plan has been produced which will remove duplication, streamline management and administration, and create greater efficiencies. It will make an important contribution towards the delivery of those savings that were envisaged being delivered through ESA.

- (iii) The delay in establishing ESA has resulted in planned reductions in posts not yet being achieved. However the convergence plan, which has been developed, aims to identify posts which can be reduced in advance of ESA

Education Budget Cuts

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the impact of the £74 million cut in the education budget, particularly on capital projects of the Education and Library Boards.

(AQW 4161/10)

Minister of Education: De na coigiltí is fiú £74 milliún le bheith soláthraithe ag mo Roinn, soláthrófar £51.7 milliún ó chaiteachas reatha agus tiocfaidh coigiltí de £22 milliún ó infheistiú caipitil. Tá mé ag breathnú ar roghanna faoi láthair chun na coigiltí seo a sholáthar agus ní dhéanfar aon chinneadh go ndéanfar measúnú comhionannais ar gach ceann de na tograí.

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. I am currently considering options for delivering these savings and no decisions will be made until an equality assessment is carried out on each of the proposals.

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.

It is critically important that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place. I have therefore recently commissioned a review of all current major capital school projects to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term. This review is still ongoing but any decisions on savings from the capital budget in 2010/11 will be dependant on the outcome of the review.

I hope to be in a position to make final decisions in the coming weeks.

Education Budget Cuts

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education to list the capital projects of the Education and Library Boards that will not be progressed due to the £74 million cut in the education budget.

(AQW 4162/10)

Minister of Education: De na coigiltí is fiú £74 milliún le bheith soláthraithe ag mo Roinn, soláthrófar £51.7 milliún ó chaiteachas reatha agus tiocfaidh coigiltí de £22 milliún ó infheistiú caipitil. Tá mé ag breathnú ar roghanna faoi láthair chun na coigiltí seo a sholáthar agus ní dhéanfar aon chinneadh go ndéanfar measúnú comhionannais ar gach ceann de na tograí.

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I hope to be in a position to make final decisions in the coming weeks.

Capital Build Programme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education which projects are planned for capital build in 2010/11.
(AQW 4165/10)

Minister of Education: De na coigiltí is fiú £74 milliún le bheith soláthraithe ag mo Roinn, soláthrófar £51.7 milliún ó chaiteachas reatha agus tiocfaidh coigiltí de £22 milliún ó infheistiú caipitil. Tá mé ag breathnú ar roghanna faoi láthair chun na coigiltí seo a sholáthar agus ní dhéanfar aon chinneadh go ndéanfar measúnú comhionannais ar gach ceann de na tograí.

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I hope to be in a position to make final decisions in the coming weeks.

Capital Build Programme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education which capital projects have been removed from her Department's 2010/11 Capital Build programme as a result of the Executive decision to reduce the Capital Spend programme.

(AQW 4166/10)

Minister of Education: De na coigiltí is fiú £74 milliún le bheith soláthraithe ag mo Roinn, soláthrófar £51.7 milliún ó chaiteachas reatha agus tiocfaidh coigiltí de £22 milliún ó infheistiú caipitil. Tá mé ag breathnú ar roghanna faoi láthair chun na coigiltí seo a sholáthar agus ní dhéanfar aon chinneadh go ndéanfar measúnú comhionannais ar gach ceann de na tograí.

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I hope to be in a position to make final decisions in the coming weeks.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education 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 their commitment under Investing for Health.

(AQW 4175/10)

Minister of Education: Sainaitníonn mo Roinn gur deitéarmanant sóisialta tábhachtach sláinte é an t-oideachas agus tá sí go hiomlán tiomanta do straitéis Infheistíochta sa tSláinte. Tá mé i mo bhall den Ghrúpa Idir-Aireachta um Fhoréigean Baile agus Gnéasach, den Ghrúpa Comhordaithe Aireachta um Fhéinmharú a Chosc agus den Fhochoiste Aireachta um Pháistí agus Daoine Óga ina bpléitear saincheistean leathana leis an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí. Ina theannta sin, bhí cruinnithe agus díospóireachtaí rialta ag m'fheidhmeannaigh le feidhmeannaigh na

Roinne Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí ag leibhéal straitéiseach ar athbheithniú na hInfheistíochta sa tSláinte, tríd an Ghrúpa Aireachta um Shláinte an Phobail.

My Department recognises that education is an important social determinant of health and is fully committed to the Investing for Health strategy. I am a member of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence, Ministerial Co-ordination Group on Suicide Prevention and the Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People where cross cutting issues with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are discussed. In addition my officials have had regular meetings and discussions with DHSSPS officials at a strategic level about the review of Investing for Health, through the Ministerial Group on Public Health. However, there are also many underpinning health strategies and reviews which support its aims eg Obesity Prevention Strategy, Promoting Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing (PEHAW), the Suicide Strategy Implementation body, the Ministerial Sub-Group on Safeguarding, the Bamford Review, Mental Health Promotion, Sexual Health Promotion, Domestic and Sexual Violence Group, Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy and the New strategic Direction on Drugs and Alcohol. Officials in the Department, at various levels, have engaged with DHSSPS officials through formal meetings and discussions on these and other related issues.

My Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on all aspects of the Investing for Health Strategy.

Emotional Well-being in Schools

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Education what investment has been made in the promotion of emotional well-being in (i) primary schools; and (ii) post-primary schools in each of the last three years. **(AQW 4197/10)**

Minister of Education: The promotion of pupils' emotional health and wellbeing is a critical element in ensuring that all our young people reach their potential thereby supporting the overall drive to improve standards.

The direct investment by my Department which contributes to positive emotional health is made in the context of a range of activities undertaken by schools which have the same objective, such as:

- the inclusion of personal development in the new curriculum with the emphasis on exploring and dealing with emotions;
- inclusive practices to engage all pupils in extra-curricular activities and celebrating success;
- mentoring, peer mediation, circle time;
- school councils and other pupil participation schemes;
- volunteering;
- effective pastoral care systems; and
- effective liaison between schools and pupils' parents.

The actual expenditure by my Department, excluding the expenditure on support services to pupils provided through the Education and Library Boards, is set out in the following table:

Post-primary	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10*
Counselling	1,480	1,932	2,099

* Estimated

Caitheadh £92,000, áfach, le linn 2008/9 agus 2009/10 ar dhá staidéar taighde. Cuirfidh an chéad taighde, a bhfuil ina iniúchadh ar idirghabhálacha teiripeacha i mbunscoileanna agus i scoileanna speisialta agus an dara taighde, ar an bhealach is éifeachtaí chun teachtaireachtaí cosanta a sholáthar do pháistí ar aois bhunscoile, le forbairt chláir san earnáil bhunoideachais in am trátha.

To date some £92,000 has been spent over 2008/9 and 2009/10 on two research studies. The first, an audit of therapeutic interventions in primary and special schools and the second, on the most effective way to deliver safeguarding messages to pupils of primary age, will contribute to the development of a programme in the primary sector in due course.

My Department is currently developing a Pupils' Emotional Health and Well-Being Programme. 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, focusing initially on the post primary sector.

A number of working groups, made up of 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. It is expected that the Programme, once established will make a significant contribution to the wider strategies around improving mental health in our community.

Educational Underachievement

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education what action she has taken in relation to educational underachievement among working class Protestant boys.

(AQW 4235/10)

Minister of Education: Maireann mífhuntaíste oideachasúil i measc Protastúnach agus Caitliceach, buachaillí agus cailíní araon. Baineann sí le mífhuntaíste socheachnamaíoch agus cuirtear easpa dóchais léi ró-mhinic.

Educational disadvantage exists among Protestants and Catholics, boys and girls, and among our ethnic minorities. Too often, it is related to socio-economic disadvantage and compounded by poverty of aspiration.

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 put an end to these detrimental impacts, particularly on our most disadvantaged young people.

My focus is on tackling underachievement wherever it exists and improving outcomes for all our 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 inter-connected policies aimed at ensuring every child fulfils her or his potential – Every School a Good School, Transfer 2010, the revised curriculum, the literacy and numeracy strategy, the review of SEN and Inclusion, the Achieving Belfast and Derry programmes and the establishment of ESA.

Executive Papers

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education to list the subject matter of each of the 5 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 4267/10)

Minister of Education: Níl sé de nós agam sonraí ar ghnó an Tionóil a nochtadh. Tá inneachar pháipéar an Tionóil agus gach gné de ghnó an Tionóil faoi rún.

It is not my practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Enrolment Figures

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education (i) how many post-primary (a) controlled schools; (b) maintained schools; and (c) integrated schools are expected to have an enrolment figure of less than 350 pupils in each of the next five years; and (ii) if projected figures are available for enrolment for these schools in each of the next 10 years.

(AQW 4330/10)

Minister of Education: Níl ar fáil ach na figiúirí fortheilgthe de réir cineál bainistíochta don bhliain atá romhainn. Tá an t-eolas ar fáil sa tábla thíos.

Projected figures are only available broken down by management type for one year ahead. The information is contained in the table below.

Post primary schools that are projected to have less than 350 pupils enrolled by management type - 2010/11

Management type	Total
Controlled	14
Catholic maintained	22
Integrated	1
Total	37

Source: School census 2009/10

Notes:

1. Figures exclude three post primary schools that are amalgamating in 2010/11.
2. Figures relate to total projected enrolment of pupils.

School Closures during the Recent Cold Spell

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education to list the number of schools in North Antrim which closed due to the recent cold spell.

(AQW 4332/10)

Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn d'aird ar AQW 4127/10 a chuir An tUasal T Burns CTR síos a d'iarr sonraí ar gach bunscoil agus meánscoil i dtuaisceart na hÉireann a dhruid le linn na haimsire fuair le déanaí.

I would refer you to AQW 4127/10 tabled by Mr T Burns MLA which requested details of all primary and secondary schools in the north of Ireland which closed during the recent cold weather.

A full list of schools closed is available in the Assembly Library.

Strategic Education Plan and Entitlement Framework for the Craigavon Area

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the rejected new capital build at Lurgan College, what steps she has taken to ensure that a strategic education plan and entitlement framework for the Craigavon area is completed.

(AQW 4340/10)

Minister of Education: Tar éis sráithe cruinnithe idir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt (SELB) agus an Roinn, scríobh an Roinn chuig an SELB lena mbuarthaí a leagan amach agus le hiarraidh ar an SELB go n-athbhreithneoidh sé riachtanais infheistithe chaipitil Choláiste na Lorgan, laistigh de chomhthéacs níos fairsinge sheachadadh an Chreat Teidlíochta i gceantar Chraigavon, chun plean straitéiseach don cheantar a fhorbairt. Táthar ag feitheamh leis an phlean.

Following a series of meetings between the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) and the Department, the Department has written to the SELB outlining its concerns and asking that the SELB reviews the capital investment needs of Lurgan College, within the wider context of delivery of the Entitlement Framework (EF) in the Craigavon area, with the view to bringing forward a strategic plan for the area. The plan is awaited.

Additionally, schools in the Craigavon Area Learning Community are receiving support from the Entitlement Framework Development Officers based in the SELB and CCMS to draw up an action plan designed to ensure full delivery of the Entitlement Framework by 2013.

Capital Build Programme

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Education why her Department announces capital build schemes for schools which then fail to be taken forward or delayed.

(AQW 4341/10)

Minister of Education: The Department announces major capital schemes based on identified educational needs of schools and the level of resources available at the time to take forward new schemes.

Under the Investment Delivery Plan (IDP) my Department has been taking forward 108 major capital projects. To date 24 of these projects have been completed and 16 are currently on site. The remaining 68 are at various stages of the planning and approval process.

The timing of construction of announced projects can be affected by a number of factors including changes over time to the long term viability of a school, planning issues and the availability of capital resources.

Since the IDP was published in 2008 no projects have been abandoned. While the majority of the projects have not been taken forward within the timeframe originally envisaged, they have been taken forward when all the necessary appraisal and approval processes have been completed and where funds have been available.

Is riachtanach a chinntiú go bhfuil an t-infheistiú san eastát oideachais i gcomhréir leis an chreat beartais atá mé ag cur i bhfeidhm. Ar 15 Deireadh Fómhair, d'fhógair mé, dá bhrí sin, athbhreithniú ar gach tionscadal caipitil le dearbhú go bhfuil siad go léir i gcomhréir leis an chreat beartais agus, mar sin, go mbeidh siad inmharthana agus inbhuanaithe san fhadtéarma.

It is necessary to ensure that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place. On 15 October, therefore I announced a review of all capital projects to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term.

This review will ensure that available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for the taxpayer.

Capital Build Programme

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what preliminary work is carried out by her departmental officials with (i) schools; (ii) Boards of Governors; (iii) Education and Library Boards; and (iv) education authorities, prior to a school's new build project being included on the list of capital build projects announced by her Department.

(AQW 4342/10)

Minister of Education: Is próiseas cuimsitheach é an próiseas pleanála caipitil a chuimsíonn gach eochairpháirtí leasmhar ag tráthanna na heochairchinnteoireachta. Go stairiúil, oibríonn uinéirí agus tionscnóirí scoile go gar le príomhoidí scoile, tuismitheoirí agus boird ghobarnóirí chun ollthionscadail chaipitil tógála a aithint le haghaidh bhreithniú na Roinne.

The capital planning process is an inclusive one which involves all key stakeholders at the key decision making points. Historically, school owners and promoters work closely with school principals, parents and Boards of Governors to identify major capital build projects for consideration by the Department.

Under the current process, if, following a technical assessment of the current condition of the building, the need for a capital build project is recognised by the Department then a long-term enrolment and suitable options for consideration in an Economic Appraisal (EA) are agreed with the relevant school owners and promoters. The EA determines the preferred option for any future capital investment. All proposed schemes are scrutinised in the context DE policy including Area-Based Planning, the Sustainable Schools' Policy and equality duties.

Newbuild Projects

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Education (i) how many school new build projects announced by her Department have been (a) delayed; or (b) abandoned; (ii) what this is as a percentage of the overall number of projects announced; and (iii) the reason for the delay or cancellation in each case, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4343/10)

Minister of Education: The Department announces major capital schemes based on identified educational needs of schools and the level of resources available at the time to take forward new schemes.

Under the Investment Delivery Plan (IDP) my Department has been taking forward 108 major capital projects. To date 24 of these projects have been completed and 16 are currently on site. The remaining 68 are at various stages of the planning and approval process.

The timing of construction of announced projects can be affected by a number of factors including changes over time to the long term viability of a school, planning issues and the availability of capital resources.

Since the IDP was published in 2008 no projects have been abandoned. While the majority of the projects have not been taken forward within the timeframe originally envisaged, they have been taken forward when all the necessary appraisal and approval processes have been completed and where funds have been available.

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It is necessary to ensure that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place. On 15 October, therefore I announced a review of all capital projects to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term.

This review will ensure that available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for the taxpayer.

Rural Primary Schools: Additional Resources

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Education what additional resources have been made available to rural primary schools to enable them to deliver (i) the curriculum; (ii) special needs education; and (iii) I.T.
(AQW 4367/10)

Minister of Education: Níor cuireadh aon acmhainní breise do bhunscoileanna tuaithe go speisialta i dtaca leis an churacclam, oideachas riachtanas speisialta ná teicneolaíocht faisnéise.

No additional resources have been made available specifically to rural primary schools in respect of the curriculum, special needs education or information technology (IT).

All grant-aided schools receive delegated budgets through the Common Funding Formula (CFF), ensuring that schools of similar size and similar characteristics are funded on a consistent and equitable basis regardless of their management type, sector or geographical location. Schools in rural areas are funded on the same basis as those with similar characteristics in urban areas.

However, the CFF does include specific factors, and minimum funding levels, that are designed to assist small schools meeting curricular requirements. In terms of IT support for schools, this is delivered by C2K on behalf of the five Education and Library Boards. C2K is responsible for the provision of information and communications technology (ICT) managed service to all grant-aided schools.

The administration of a school's budget is determined by the Board of Governors and Principal who are best placed to make decisions on the most effective use of resources in accordance with their schools' needs and relative priorities. Where there are specific and unavoidable pressures which cannot be addressed by individual schools, there are mechanisms for a school to seek additional support from the centre budget of the relevant Funding Authority.

SparkleBox Website

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Education if she is aware that the owner and operator of the educational resource website 'Sparklebox' was found guilty of downloading abusive images of children; and if so, what steps she is taking to ensure that material from the 'Sparklebox' website is not used by schools.

(AQW 4381/10)

Minister of Education: Is láithreán gréasáin achmainní do mhúinteoirí bunscoile é Sparklebox agus bhí sé ar fáil ar an líonra C2k. Dhíchumasaigh C2k aon chomhpháirt idirghníomach féideartha laistigh den suíomh.

Sparklebox is a website of resources for primary teachers and was available to schools on the C2k network. C2k has disabled any possible interactive component within this site.

I am aware that the operator of Sparklebox was jailed for 12 months on 8 January 2010 in England, having been found guilty of personally making and possessing indecent images of children.

I am making a full statement to the Assembly outlining the action I am taking in relation to this matter. I will forward you a copy of the final statement.

Fairtrade Products in School Meals

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Education how many schools have a requirement to include Fairtrade products in school meals.

(AQW 4382/10)

Minister of Education: Is iad na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne atá freagrach as oibriú sheirbhís na mbéilí scoile sna hearnálacha rialaithe agus faoi chothabháil agus scoileanna aonair deonacha gramadaí agus scoileanna aonair imeasctha faoi chothabháil stáit.

The day-to-day operation of the school meals service is a matter for the Education and Library Boards in the controlled and maintained sectors and individual voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools.

The Department is not aware of any schools which have a requirement to include Fairtrade products in their school meals. However, the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), has confirmed that Fairtrade tea and coffee are available on the General Groceries Contract which the BELB administers on behalf of the five Boards.

Urgent School Repairs

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Education to estimate the cost of completing the most urgent repairs to (i) primary school estates; and (ii) secondary school estates.

(AQW 4385/10)

Minister of Education: De réir chóras bainistíochta eastát na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, is é costas ar réadmhaoín a thaifeadadh san aicmiú is airde riachtanais a fheabhsú ná £33,987,247.50 do bhunscoileanna agus £26,480,911.00 do mheánscoileanna.

According to the Education and Library Boards' estate management system, the cost of making good the properties recorded as being in the highest classification of need is £33,987,247.50 in primary schools and £26,480,911.00 in secondary schools.

Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the proposed start date for the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education programme; (ii) what format the programme will take; (iii) whether voluntary organisations will have access to funding to deliver community relations programmes; and (iv) whether schools will be able to access funding to participate in cross-community projects.

(AQW 4416/10)

Minister of Education: Tá an beartas um Chaidreamh Pobail, Chomhionannas agus Éagsúlacht ag an chéim fhorbartha go fóill agus tá obair bhreise ag teastáil sula bhfuil sé réidh le cur i bhfeidhm, lena n-áirítear roinnt fachtóirí atá lasmuigh de smacht díreach na Roinne Oideachais. Tá comhairliú leis an Choiste Oideachais ar siúl agus nuair atá an próiseas seo críochnaithe, eiseofar an beartas le haghaidh comhairlithe phoiblí. Faoi réir chríochnú na hoibre breise, meastar go gcuirfí an beartas i bhfeidhm go luath sa bhliain acadúil 2011/12.

The Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy is still at the development stage and further work is required prior to being ready for implementation, including a number of factors which are outside of the direct control of the Department of Education. Consultation with the Education Committee is currently on-going and when this process has been completed the policy will be issued for public consultation. Subject to completion of the additional work, it is anticipated that the policy would be implemented early in the 2010/11 academic year.

While the broad format for the policy has been agreed, this will be subject to public consultation and more detailed work in relation to the funding scheme(s) will need to be completed. It is currently proposed that the policy will focus on three main areas:

- Training and capacity building of the education workforce;
- Support for meaningful interaction between young people across education settings;
- Dissemination of good practice and relevant CRED materials.

Subject to the outcome of the consultation process, it is expected that the new CRED policy will continue to provide opportunities to support meaningful engagement between children and young people across the formal and non-formal education sectors. The exact details of the funding mechanism have not been finalised, but it is expected that the voluntary sector will continue to have a role.

The current policy will terminate on 31 March 2010, but transitional arrangements are being considered to address continuity in provision and to prepare for implementation of the new policy.

Newbuild Primary School at Carrick, Warrenpoint

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education when the provision of a new build primary school at Carrick, Warrenpoint was first recorded and documented by her Department.

(AQW 4433/10)

Minister of Education: The Department's Professional Advisors initially visited Carrick Primary School and agreed that there was a need for capital investment in April 1999.

Tá planáil le haghaidh na scoile nua ar ardghrád, agus tá aighneacht chostais réamhthairisceana á bhreathnú ag an Roinn faoi láthair. Beidh cinneadh ar an scéim seo a fhorbairt go tairiscint faoi réir thoradh an athbhreithnithe reatha ar gach tionscadal caipitil. Is é is aidhm don athbhreithniú ná a chinntiú go bhfuil gach tionscadal tacúil agus i gcomhréir le creat beartais na Roinne agus go mbeidh sé, mar sin, inchothaithe agus inmharthana san fhadtéarma.

Planning of the new school is at a very advanced stage, with a pre-tender cost submission currently under consideration by the Department. A decision to progress this scheme to tender will be subject to the outcome of the current review of all capital projects. The review is designed to ensure that all projects are consistent and supportive of the Department's policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term. .

Newbuild Primary School at Carrick, Warrenpoint

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education on what date her Department sought tenders for the provision of a new build primary school at Carrick, Warrenpoint.

(AQW 4434/10)

Minister of Education: The Department's Professional Advisors initially visited Carrick Primary School and agreed that there was a need for capital investment in April 1999.

Tá planáil le haghaidh na scoile nua ar ardghrád, agus tá aighneacht chostais réamhthairisceana á bhreathnú ag an Roinn faoi láthair. Beidh cinneadh ar an scéim seo a fhorbairt go tairiscint faoi réir thoradh an athbhreithnithe reatha ar gach tionscadal caipitil. Is é is aidhm don athbhreithniú ná a chinntiú go bhfuil gach tionscadal tacúil agus i gcomhréir le creat beartais na Roinne agus go mbeidh sé, mar sin, inchothaithe agus inmharthana san fhadtéarma.

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Teachers' Allowance

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education how many teachers in each Education and Library Board area receive (i) a protected post allowance or; (ii) a reorganisation allowance, and of these how many (a) carry out duties in-line with the payment received; and (b) do not carry out duties in line with the payment received.

(AQW 4443/10)

Minister of Education: The information requested is as follows:

Féadfaidh múinteoir iarratas a chur isteach ar an Roinn le haghaidh liúntas atheagraithe i gcásanna ina bhfulaingíonn sé/ sí laghdú ar thurastal mar gheall ar atheagrú áiseanna oideachais. Fanfaidh an liúntas atheagraithe bheith iníoctha go dtí go bhfaigheann an múinteoir tuarastal atá ar cóimhéid le, nó níos airde ná, tuarastal an phoist a bhí aige/ aici díreach roimh an atheagrú.

The pay and allowance structure for teachers does not provide for the award of protected post allowances. However, as placement on the leadership salary scale is determined by reference to school enrolment numbers principals and vice-principals may have their salaries protected following a reduction in the number of pupils enrolled at their school.

NUMBER AND COST OF RE-ORGANISATION ALLOWANCES BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA *

Education and Library Board area	Number at January 2010	Cost per financial year		
		2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast	24	£79,456.00	£64,914.40	£57,421.42
North Eastern	21	£95,570.05	£88,385.25	£83,675.24
Western	28	£147,064.22	£ 117,761.59	£115,434.40
South Eastern	17	£105,547.86	£58,616.23	£89,704.63
Southern	32	£116,971.74	£118,444.77	£123,926.31
Total	122	£544,609.87	£448,122.24	£470,162.00

* Figures exclude voluntary grammar schools

A teacher may apply to the Department for a re-organisation allowance where s/he suffers a reduction in salary as a direct result of a re-organisation of education facilities. The re-organisation allowance remains payable until such time as the teacher secures a post with a salary equal to or higher than that of the post held immediately prior to the reorganisation.

Teachers' Allowance

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education the cost to each Education and Library Board area of (i) the protected post allowance and; (ii) the reorganisation allowance, in each of the last three years. **(AQW 4444/10)**

Minister of Education: The information requested is as follows:

Féadfaidh múinteoir iarratas a chur isteach ar an Roinn le haghaidh liúntas atheagraithe i gcásanna ina bhfulaingíonn sé/ sí laghdú ar thurastal mar gheall ar atheagrú áiseanna oideachais. Fanfaidh an liúntas atheagraithe bheith iníoctha go dtí go bhfaigheann an múinteoir tuarastal atá ar cóimhéid le, nó níos airde ná, tuarastal an phoist a bhí aige/ aici díreach roimh an atheagrú.

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Class Sizes

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education for her assessment as to whether class sizes in primary schools of 25 to 30 pupils is detrimental to the education of children.
(AQW 4445/10)

Minister of Education: Tá cáilíocht na múinteoirí agus an treoir a sholáthraíonn siad ar na príomh-thionchair ar thorthaí foghlama, cé go bhfuil fianaise a léiríonn gur féidir le méideanna níos lú ranga sna luath-bhlianta dul i bhfeidhm go dearfach ar thorthaí.

The quality of teachers and the instruction they provide is the key influence on learning outcomes. There is also evidence that smaller class sizes in early years learning can have a positive impact on outcomes.

In view of this evidence and the importance of early years development, funding to specifically support the Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum is fully delegated to primary schools. In 2009-10, this amounted to some £22.3 million and builds on and increases the funding previously available under the Making a Good Start programme. The inclusion of Foundation Stage funding within primary schools' delegated formula allocations provides them with the flexibility to ensure that classroom assistance and classroom resources are deployed to deliver the Foundation Stage curriculum to primary 1 and primary 2 pupils to best effect.

The Department's policy is to keep classes for our youngest children at 30 or fewer. This policy was initiated with P1 classes in September 1998. It was extended to P1 and P2 classes in September 1999 and from September 2000 it covers Years 1-4.

I believe that the pupil:teacher ratio has a key role to play.

Grant-aid Funding

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education if she will detail any legal advice she received from the departmental solicitor regarding the legality of withdrawing grant-aid funding from preparatory schools, which she announced on 15 December 2009, and if she has not sought legal advice, whether she intends to do so.
(AQW 4458/10)

Minister of Education: D'iarr mo roinn comhairle dhleathach ó Oifig Aturnaetha na Roinne (DSO) i dtaca le dlíthiúlacht an mhaoinithe deontais a tharraingt as rannóga ullmhúcháin scoileanna gramadaí. Is í an chomhairle a thug an DSO ná go mbeadh a leithéid de tharraingt siar maoinithe dleathach faoi Airteagal 4 (7) (b) den Ord um Oideachas agus Leabharlanna.

My Department has sought legal advice from the Departmental Solicitors' Office (DSO) regarding the legality of withdrawing grant-aid funding from preparatory departments of grammar schools. The advice given by the DSO was that, under Article 4 (7) (b) of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003, such a withdrawal of funding would be legal.

Transfer Tests

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education what is the latest date for the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to commence work on a 'two test' English and Maths transfer test for examinations in November 2010.
(AQW 4514/10)

Minister of Education: Bhí an scrúdú aistrithe státturaithe deireanach sa bhliain 2008. Níl aon phleananna ar fhoirm ar bith de thástáil státturaithe sa bhliain 2010 ná sna blianta atá le teacht le haghaidh páistí a aistriú ó Bunscoilíocht go hiarbhunscoilíocht.

The last state sponsored transfer test was in 2008. There are no plans for any form of state sponsored testing in 2010 in support of transferring children from primary to post primary school or for any future years.

Exams: Pupils Cheating

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of recorded incidents of pupils cheating in (a) GCSE; and (b) A level exams in each of the last five years; and (ii) to provide a summary of the methods of cheating most frequently used.

(AQW 4517/10)

Minister of Education: Tugann an tábla seo a leanas sonraí ar mhíchleachtas i scrúduithe GCSE agus GCE i ngach bliain de na 5 bliana a chuaigh thart a thaifead an Chomhairle Churaclaim, Scrúduithe agus Measúnachta (CCSM). Soláthraíonn sé miondealú ar líon na gcásanna a aimsíodh le linn gach sráith scrúduithe Samhraidh de réir chatagóir mhíchleachtais.

The following table presents data on malpractice in GCSE and GCE examinations for each of the last 5 years recorded by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). It provides a breakdown of the number of cases detected during each summer examination series by category of malpractice.

CCEA is the main awarding body for the north of Ireland. It has 68% of the market share at A level and 65% at GCSE. Other awarding bodies offering A level and GCSE qualifications here have a much smaller share of the market. Although these bodies each hold data on malpractice, data specific to the north of Ireland is not currently available. Whilst CCEA offers a small number of A level and GCSE qualifications in England and Wales, the statistics detailed in the table below provide a reliable indicator of the trend in malpractice across examination centres here.

Type of Offence	Summer 2009		Summer 2008		Summer 2007		Summer 2006		Summer 2005	
	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)
The alteration or falsification of any results document, including certificates.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A breach of the instructions or advice of an invigilator, supervisor, or the awarding body in relation to the examination rules and regulations.	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1
Failing to abide by the conditions of supervision designed to maintain the security of the examinations.	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	2

Type of Offence	Summer 2009		Summer 2008		Summer 2007		Summer 2006		Summer 2005	
	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)
Collusion: working collaboratively with other candidates beyond what is permitted.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Copying from another candidate (including the misuse of ICT).	3	2	13	6	12	0	4	0	2	7
The deliberate destruction of work.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Disruptive behaviour in the examination room or assessment session (including the use of offensive language).	3	0	1	0	4	0	8	0	0	0
Exchanging, obtaining, receiving or passing on information which could be examination related (or the attempt to):										
Talking	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Written communication	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Making a false declaration of authenticity.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Misuse of, or attempted misuse of, examination material and resources.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bringing into the exam room notes in the wrong format or prohibited annotations.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Type of Offence	Summer 2009		Summer 2008		Summer 2007		Summer 2006		Summer 2005	
	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)
The inclusion of inappropriate, offensive or obscene material in scripts, controlled assessments coursework or portfolios.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Personation.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Plagiarism: unacknowledged copying from published sources (including the internet); incomplete referencing.	24	32	9	9	4	8	0	3	0	3
Theft (where the candidate's work is removed or stolen).	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Introduction of unauthorised material into the examination room, for example:										
Notes, study guides and personal organisers.	2	9	0	8	6	2	2	8	2	4
Own blank paper.	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Calculators, dictionaries (when prohibited).	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Personal stereo (including MP3, iPod) or and other similar electronic/digital devices.	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Mobile phone or other electronic communicating devices.	11	9	6	1	20	4	11	5	15	3

Type of Offence	Summer 2009		Summer 2008		Summer 2007		Summer 2006		Summer 2005	
	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)	GCSE (G)	GCE (A)
Behaving in a way as to undermine the integrity of the examination.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Total No of Cases	45	54	29	25	49	15	30	20	21	20

The percentages of total entries across England, Wales and the north of Ireland at GCSE and A level accounted for by CCEA entries are:

- GCSE – 3%.
- GCE – 2%.

The number of instances of malpractice as a percentage of the number of GCSE and A level entries/candidates (CCEA statistics only) is as follows:

- 2009 – 0.02%.
- 2008 – 0.01%.

The sanctions taken against offending candidates typically include:

- a warning.
- loss of marks.
- loss of aggregation or certification opportunity.

Transfer Tests

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education if the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has assessed the unregulated transfer tests from 2009/10; and if so, whether any elements of these tests could be used create a new official transfer test; and to provide details of any that could be used.

(AQW 4519/10)

Minister of Education: Is é Aistriú 2010 beartas mo Roinne ar pháistí a aistriú go hiar-bhunoideachais i mí Mheán Fómhair 2010, agus molann sé go láidir nár chóir do scoil ar bith critéir acadúla iontrála ná scrúduithe iontrála a úsáid a thacódh le feidhmiú critéar den chineál seo. Níor coimisiúnaíodh an Chomhairle Churaclaim, Scrúduithe agus Measúnachta (CCSM) ag an Roinn Oideachais le scrúduithe neamhrialaithe a mheas atá á ndéanamh le linn 2009/10 ag roinnt scoileanna díchleamhnaithe gramadaí, mar go bhfuil siad taobh amuigh de bheartas na Roinne ar aistriú iar-bhunscoile agus ní thacaítear leo ag an Roinn ar bhealach ar bith. Níl aon phleananna ar aon fhoirm de scrúdú státuirraithe a fhorbairt mar gheall ar shocrúithe Aistriú 2011.

Transfer 2010 is my Department's policy for transferring children to post-primary in September 2010, and it strongly recommends that no school should use academic admissions criteria or entrance tests that would support the application of such criteria. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has not been commissioned by the Department of Education to engage in any assessment of the unregulated tests being used by a number of breakaway grammar schools as these lie outside the Department's policy on post-primary transfer and are not supported by the Department in any way. There are no plans to develop any form of state sponsored test in support of Transfer 2011 arrangements.

Transfer Tests

Mr A Attwood asked the Minister of Education if a transfer test was prepared by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment for 2008/09, and if so, how this differs, if at all, from the transfer tests of 2009/10.

(AQW 4520/10)

Minister of Education: Ba é an bhliain 2008/09 an bhliain dheireanach inar cuireadh scrúdú aistrithe státturraithe ar fáil, rud a coimisiúnaíodh tríd an Chomhairle Churaclaim, Scrúduithe agus Measúnachta (CCSM). Níor coimisiúnaíodh CCSM ag an Roinn Oideachais le scrúduithe neamhrialaithe a mheas atá á ndéanamh le linn 2009/10 ag roinnt scoileanna díchleamhnaithe gramadaí, mar go bhfuil siad taobh amuigh de bheartas Aistriú 2010 ar aistriú iar-bhunscoile. Níl aon phleananna ar aon fhoirm de scrúdú státturraithe a fhorbairt mar gheall ar shocrúithe Aistriú 2011.

2008/09 was the final year in which a state sponsored transfer test was made available, commissioned through the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). CCEA has not been commissioned by the Department of Education to engage in any assessment of unregulated tests being used during 2009/10 by a number of breakaway grammar schools, as these lie outside the Department's Transfer 2010 policy on post-primary transfer. There are no plans to develop any form of state sponsored test in support of Transfer 2011 arrangements.

Computer Adaptive Testing

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education if the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has assessed the (i) desirability; and (ii) feasibility of Computer Adaptive Testing; and if so, to detail the outcome and the advice given to her Department.

(AQW 4521/10)

Minister of Education: The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has not assessed the desirability or feasibility of Computer Adaptive Testing.

Legislation requires that pupils in years 4-7 are assessed in the autumn term in reading and mathematics using a method of computer-based assessment specified by the Department of Education. CCEA has carried out trials and evaluated computer adaptive tools for the purpose of supporting those statutory assessment arrangements, the purpose of which is to provide information for teachers which can be used for diagnostic purposes. The two systems on which CCEA focused its trialling and evaluation were the Interactive Computerised Assessment System (InCAS) for Reading and General Mathematics and the Alta Mathematics assessment tool.

Trials of both systems were carried out in schools and evaluated to assess manageability and fitness-for-purpose. For each system CCEA advised that they could be valuable in supporting strategies to improve standards in literacy and numeracy. The tools were recommended on the basis that they:

- provided information which could be used by teachers for diagnostic purposes
- were specifically tailored to the revised Curriculum
- adapted to the level of ability of each pupil
- were computer marked/scored.

As a result of this work, InCAS was specified as the diagnostic assessment tool for statutory diagnostic assessment in Years 4-7. Additionally, Alta has been made available to all grant-aided primary and post-primary schools as a second (non-statutory) assessment tool for mathematics and many schools make use of it to inform their teaching and learning in mathematics. It is important that I stress that these are, by their nature, diagnostic assessment tools designed to help teachers in planning their teaching and learning and are neither designed nor approved for any use beyond that.

Chomh maith leis sin, agus tar éis earráidí a chuaigh i bhfeidhm ar thuairiscí measúnaithe InCAS roinnt scoileanna san fhómhar a chuaigh thart, chuir mé grúpa oibre ar bun le comhairle bhreise a sholáthar ar an dóigh is fearr le tacú le scoileanna chun úsáid a bhaint as an uirlís dhiagnóiseach mheasúnaithe seo.

Additionally, and following the recent errors that affected some schools' InCAS assessment reports last autumn, I have established a working group to provide further advice on how we can best support schools in making use of this diagnostic assessment tool.

Transfer Tests

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education whether the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has (i) the manpower; (ii) the expertise; and (iii) the finance and resources to deliver a 'two test' English and Maths transfer test; and if not, what steps is it taking to ensure that it can deliver.

(AQW 4526/10)

Minister of Education: Bhí an scrúdú aistrithe státturraithe deireanach sa bhliain 2008. Níl aon phleananna ar fhoirm ar bith de thástáil státturraithe sa bhliain 2010 ná sna blianta atá le teacht le haghaidh páistí a aistriú ó Bunscoilíocht go hiarbhunscoilíocht.

The last state sponsored transfer test was in 2008. There are no plans for any form of state sponsored testing in 2010 in support of transferring children from primary to post primary school or for any future years.

GSCE Examination Results

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail GSCE examination results achieved by (i) Protestant girls; and (ii) Roman Catholic girls; (iii) Protestant boys; and (iv) Roman Catholic boys, broken down by (a) subject; and (b) grade in 2007/08 and 2008/09.

(AQW 4541/10)

Minister of Education: Ós rud é go bhfuil torthaí scrúduithe i níos mó ná 50 ábhar, tá socraithe agam go gcuirfear an t-eolas a iarradh i Leabharlann an Tionóil. Níl an t-eolas ar fáil de réir chúlra pobail na ndaltaí agus, mar sin de, miondealaítear é de réir chineálacha bainistíochta scoile.

As there are examination results for over 50 subjects I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library. The information is not available by community background of pupils and so has been broken down instead by school management types.

Irish GCSE

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 623/10, to detail the number of (i) Roman Catholic boys; (ii) Protestant boys; (iii) Roman Catholic girls; and (iv) Protestant girls who sat an Irish GCSE exam in 2007/08 and 2008/09.

(AQW 4542/10)

Minister of Education: Níl eolas ar chúlra pobail iontrálacha i nGCSE Gaeilge ar fáil. Sannadh cineál bainistíochta scoile do gach iontráil, atá bunaithe ar an scoil ina bhfuil an dalta rollaithe. Soláthraítear sna táblaí thíos líon na n-iontrálacha do GCSE Gaeilge de réir chineál bainistíochta scoile agus inscne.

Information on the community background of GCSE Irish entries is not available. Each entry has instead been assigned a school management type based on the school at which the pupil is enrolled. The number of entries for GCSE Irish by school management type and gender is provided in the tables below:

ENTRIES IN GCSE IRISH BY SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TYPE AND GENDER, 2007/08 – 2008/09

	Entries in GCSE Irish (Total)	
School management type	2007/08	2008/09
Catholic managed	2,015	1,693
Other managed	132	108

	Entries in GCSE Irish (Male)	
School management type	2007/08	2008/09
Catholic managed	875	709
Other managed	60	49

	Entries in GCSE Irish (Female)	
School management type	2007/08	2008/09
Catholic managed	1,140	984
Other managed	72	59

Notes: School management type groups schools according to their scheme of management. 'Catholic managed' includes Catholic maintained non-Grammar schools and Catholic managed voluntary Grammar schools. 'Other managed' includes controlled, controlled integrated, and grant maintained integrated non-grammar schools and other managed voluntary Grammar schools. In some cases, this means a male or female pupil with a Protestant community background being included under the Catholic managed sector, and vice versa.

Newbuild at Glasry College, Ballyhalbert

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3328/10, to confirm the start date for the new build at Glasry College, Ballyhalbert; and if she has considered that delays will add to rising costs of boiler and roof repairs in the short-term.

(AQW 4545/10)

Minister of Education: Ós rud é go bhfuil an t-athbhreithniú ar thionscadail chaipitil leanúnach, níl rud ar bith eile agam le cur leis an fhreagra a thug mé ar dhul chun cinn an tionscadail seo ag an am seo. Comhairleofar Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt, atá freagrach as Coláiste Ghlasraigh, ar thoradh an athbhreithnithe in am trátha.

As the review of capital projects is on-going, I therefore have nothing further to add to the previous response I gave about progress on this project at this time. The South Eastern Education and Library Board, which has responsibility for Glasry College, will be advised of the outcome of the review in due course.

Any interim concerns about health and safety or urgent maintenance works needed at the school should be brought to the attention of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board which should consider the request and the associated costs.

Pupil Numbers in Each Education and Library Board Area

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Education how many pupils there were in each Education and Library Board area in (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; and (iii) 2009.

(AQW 4557/10)

Minister of Education: Solathraítear na figiúirí sna táblaí thíos.

The figures are provided in the tables below.

PUPILS AT SCHOOLS BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA 2007/08

	Education and Library Board					
School type	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Nursery schools	1,561	1,363	1,020	1,121	790	5,855
Primary schools	24,983	37,681	35,094	38,602	30,279	166,639

	Education and Library Board					
School type	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Post-primary schools	30,285	32,274	25,634	33,037	26,712	147,942
Special schools	1,275	1,012	1,166	418	740	4,611
Total	58,104	72,330	62,914	73,178	58,521	325,047

PUPILS AT SCHOOLS BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA 2008/09

	Education and Library Board					
School type	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Nursery schools	1,563	1,376	1,020	1,130	780	5,869
Primary schools	24,617	37,085	34,858	38,455	29,591	164,811
Post-primary schools	29,965	32,528	25,731	33,163	26,599	147,986
Special schools	1,280	996	1,181	423	718	4,598
Total	57,425	71,985	62,790	73,171	57,688	323,264

PUPILS AT SCHOOLS BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA 2009

	Education and Library Board					
School type	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Nursery schools	1,563	1,369	1,018	1,124	783	5,857
Primary schools	24,245	37,013	34,666	38,551	29,101	163,782
Post-primary schools	29,923	32,438	25,672	33,207	26,532	147,772
Special schools	1,248	992	1,115	446	642	4,443
Total	56,979	71,812	62,471	73,328	57,058	321,854

Source: School census

Note:

Figures relate to the areas in which the schools attended are located.

Safer Internet Use for Children and Young People

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Education what steps her Department is taking to promote safer internet use for children and young people.
(AQW 4563/10)

Minister of Education: Safeguarding children in all aspects of their education is of paramount importance and for this reason I made a statement to the Assembly on 8 February 2010 about the Sparklebox Teacher Resource Website.

Scríobh mo Roinn chuig Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair lena iarraidh air iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar an dóigh ar bainistíodh saincheist Sparklebox agus moltaí a dhéanamh ar cad iad na ceachtanna is féidir a fhoghlaim ón cheist maidir le polasaithe agus nósanna imeachta um chosaint a fheabhsú agus a fhorbairt. D'iarr mé air tuarascáil a thabhairt isteach roimh 24 Márta 2010.

My Department has written to the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board to instruct him to investigate the manner in which the Sparklebox situation was handled and to make recommendations on what lessons can be learned from that to enhance further the policies and procedures for protecting

I have asked for a report by 24 March 2010.

In 2007, the Department issued a circular and guidance on the acceptable use of the internet and digital technologies. Schools must have policies on the safe and effective use of the internet.

The guidance, which includes resources about internet safety specially designed to be used by teachers, parents and pupils, is available on the DE website and is kept under review as new challenges, threats and legal requirements emerge.

In my statement to the Assembly on 8 February I announced that, as part of my response to the discovery that the owner of Sparklebox, a website available to schools through C2k, had been jailed in England for paedophile offences, my Department would issue follow-up guidance to the 2007 Circular. This new guidance will specifically allude to safeguarding arrangements in light of the Sparklebox experience. My Department is also fully engaged with the Inter-Departmental Group on Safeguarding. This group is progressing work on an action plan which will set in place measures to enhance even further e-safety for young people.

Internet safety is also taught through the revised curriculum, now in place for all pupils here. Teachers have received support and guidance on integrating teaching about internet safety and online communication generally. This contributes to the area of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, which looks at developing a proactive and responsible approach by pupils to safety, including the internet.

Transfer Tests

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education if the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has sufficient finance to deliver the new transfer tests this year, and if not, what additional funding is required.

(AQW 4570/10)

Minister of Education: Bhí an scrúdú aistrithe státturaithe deireanach sa bhliain 2008. Níl aon phleananna ar fhoirm ar bith de thástáil státturaithe sa bhliain 2010 ná sna blianta atá le teacht le haghaidh páistí a aistriú ó Bunscoilíocht go hiarbhunscoilíocht.

The last state sponsored transfer test was in 2008. There are no plans for any form of state sponsored testing in 2010 in support of transferring children from primary to post primary school or for any future years.

Intercultural Tolerance and Awareness

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Education (i) for her assessment of the work of the South Belfast Area Project in building intercultural tolerance and awareness amongst vulnerable and marginalised young people across seven disadvantaged communities who may have been involved in sectarianism and racism; and (ii) what steps she intends to take to protect the two posts delivering this project which are currently on a 90 day notice.

(AQW 4571/10)

Minister of Education: Bainistítear Tionscadal Cheantar Dheisceart Bhéal Feirste ag Seirbhís don Ógra Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste (BOLBF). Chomhairligh Príomhfheidhmeannach BOLBF gurb é is aidhm don tionscadal a thacú le forbairt phearsanta agus shóisialta na ndaoine óga sa cheantar, go háirithe na daoine sin atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste nó atá eisiata go sóisialta, agus soláthraíonn sé réimse tionscnamh atá i gcomhréir le Curaclam na Seirbhíse don Ógra chun na daoine óga atá bainteach leis a chumasú lena gcreidimh phearsanta agus luachanna pearsanta a thástáil agus chun glacadh agus tuiscint ar dhearcaí daoine eile a bhaint amach fosta.

The South Belfast Area Project is managed by the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) Youth Service. The Chief Executive of the BELB has advised that the project aims to support the personal and social development of young people in the area, particularly those who are disadvantaged or socially excluded and delivers a range of initiatives in line with the Youth Service Curriculum to enable the young people involved to test their personal beliefs and values and also to gain an acceptance and understanding of the views of others.

The Chief Executive has also advised that the project has carried out a number of initiatives aimed at building intercultural tolerance and understanding, including an intensive community relations programme between young people from Donegal Pass and the Ormeau Road area and an 'Exploring Cultures Programme', which established a four-way partnership between the project, the Chinese Welfare Association, Finaghy Youth Centre and ArtsEkta.

The Education and Training Inspectorate has recently carried out an evaluation of outreach work in the BELB area, for the Department of Education. The evaluation included the outreach provided by youth workers as part of the South Belfast Area Project. An oral report has been given to the BELB indicating that the work is satisfactory; the full report will be published in the next few weeks.

ii) It is the responsibility for the BELB to determine how it allocates resources for youth provision within its area. The BELB has confirmed that it has given the two outreach/detached workers involved in the South Belfast Area Project 90-day protective notice, which is normal practice when funding for posts is drawing to an end and decisions about on-going funding have not yet been made. BELB will make a decision on the future of these posts when they have been notified of their 2010/11 youth service budget.

My officials are working to ensure that Boards are notified of all budget allocations as quickly as possible.

Unemployed School Leavers

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school leavers who were unemployed and not in further or higher education six months after leaving school, broken down by council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4592/10)

Minister of Education: Tá an freagra cuimsithe sa tábla thíos. Bailítear na sonraí seo mar chuid de Suirbhé ar Fhágáilithe Scoile i mí na Samhna, tuairim is 5 mhí tar éis dheireadh na bliana acadúla roimhe. Taifeadann an scoil an t-eolas nuair a iarradh ar na sonraí.

The answer is contained in the table below. These data are collected as part of the School Leavers Survey in November, approximately 5 months after the end of the previous academic year. The information is recorded by the school at the time of the data request.

NUMBER OF SCHOOL LEAVERS WITH A DESTINATION RECORDED BY THE SCHOOL AS UNEMPLOYED BY COUNCIL AREA OF RESIDENCE 2005/06 TO 2007/08

Council Area Of Residence	2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Number Unemployed	Total School Leavers	Number Unemployed	Total School Leavers	Number Unemployed	Total School Leavers
Antrim	11	532	23	645	16	663
Ards	22	1007	15	971	25	945
Armagh	13	940	10	842	12	860
Ballymena	42	881	32	738	27	748
Ballymoney	5	424	6	381	10	400

Council Area Of Residence	2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Number Unemployed	Total School Leavers	Number Unemployed	Total School Leavers	Number Unemployed	Total School Leavers
Banbridge	30	677	28	648	22	603
Belfast	188	3535	222	3497	189	3306
Carrickfergus	30	564	27	516	11	577
Castlereagh	18	855	23	845	17	854
Coleraine	35	791	19	821	34	710
Cookstown	20	584	16	516	15	527
Craigavon	68	1262	23	1267	31	1262
Derry	70	1793	51	1843	80	1727
Down	21	1053	25	947	33	994
Dungannon	23	842	22	787	26	767
Fermanagh	17	904	22	862	21	793
Larne	18	399	23	451	19	387
Limavady	13	527	11	502	9	457
Lisburn	33	1587	37	1583	58	1588
Magherafelt	16	658	19	673	21	631
Moyle	*	244	*	243	*	250
Newry & Mourne	38	1544	23	1502	41	1400
Newtownabbey	41	1112	52	1076	40	1025
North Down	14	917	33	957	29	931
Omagh	15	803	16	729	12	718
Strabane	13	659	14	536	19	575
Missing/Invalid Postcodes	#	434	#	425	#	393

Source: School Leavers Survey

* enotes fewer than five pupils

figure has not been provided due to rules of statistical disclosure

SparkleBox Website

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the terms of reference; (ii) the timescale; and (iii) who will be conducting the investigation into the handling of the Sparklebox case by her Department and the Western Education and Library Board.

(AQW 4641/10)

Minister of Education: Seolfaidh Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair, Barry Mulholland, ar a bhfuil C2k ina stiúrthóireacht, iniúchadh ar láimhseáil an cháis ó C2k. Seo a leanas tearmaí tagartha a iniúchta.

Barry Mulholland, Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board, of which C2k is a directorate, will conduct the investigation into C2k's handling of the case.

The terms of reference of his investigation are as follows.

1. To establish and explain the actions of C2k from the time it became aware of the trial of the owner of Sparklebox to the point at which it removed access to Sparklebox from the system.
2. To report on the protocols, procedures and processes used by C2k in respect of child protection issues relating to schools' use of the C2k system and to assess whether they were appropriate and effective. In particular to give an assessment of whether C2k's responses were proportionate and timely.
3. To report on C2k's reporting procedures to the Department around child protection issues.
4. To determine if the Sparklebox website contained any content or interactive elements that would have been harmful to children? If so, to explain what action was taken regarding these elements?
5. To determine how many schools in the north of Ireland used the Sparklebox website.
6. To determine how this matter can be brought to the attention of service providers and users.
7. To make recommendations on what lessons can be learned from this case in terms of enhancing further policies and procedures for protecting the safety of children. The recommendations should identify cross-cutting issues which affect other departments in the north of Ireland, as well as any north/south and British/Irish issues.

The Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board has been instructed to report to the Department by 24 March.

The Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education will oversee an examination of the Department's internal procedures and protocols.

Department for Employment and Learning

Efficiency Saving Measures

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why efficiency saving measures within his Department are directed at the delivery of courses rather than reducing the cost of administration. **(AQW 4154/10)**

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): There are three key factors impacting upon the administration budget within my Department in 2010/11:

- The gross administrative budget allocation for Budget 2008-11 was flat, hence pay inflation has had to be absorbed within a fixed baseline;
- The Department for Employment and Learning must deliver cumulative cash releasing efficiencies from the administrative budget, as part of the Budget 2008-11 process - the budget in 2010/11 will be £1.0m (3.8%) lower than as at April 2008. This is detailed in our Efficiency Delivery Plan, which is on the Department's website;
- The impact of the NICS Equal Pay claim negotiations will create a further pressure upon the administration budget of c£0.5m in 2010/11.

Therefore my Administrative budget is making a significant contribution to the overall savings requirement from my Department. The additional savings in 2010/11 are not directed at the delivery of courses: there are no plans to reduce the recurrent funding available to the Further Education sector and the Higher Education sector's proposed allocation in 2010/11 still shows growth of 3.9%.

Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning in relation to the Learner Access and Engagement Pilot programme for 2009/10 (i) what was the budget on 1 April 2009; (ii) if any changes have been made to this budget; and (iii) what was the expenditure up to 31/12/09.

(AQW 4168/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The expenditure on Learner Access and Engagement pilot programme is dependent upon the engagement and enrolment of learners by third party organisations. Based on delivery to date, a budget of £500k was allocated for the programme at 1 April 2009; this budget remains unchanged. Up to 31 December 2009 £137,675 has been expended.

Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is the expected cost to his Department of the Learner Access and Engagement Pilot programme for 2009/10.

(AQW 4170/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The expenditure on Learner Access and Engagement pilot programme is dependent upon the engagement and enrolment of learners by third party organisations. Projected expenditure for the programme during the 2009/10 financial year is £500,000.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning 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 4183/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I would refer you to my response to Assembly Question 3517/10 where I indicated that my Department is actively engaged with a number of the strategies which underpin the Investing for Health Strategy. In addition to attendance at interdepartmental meetings held in the past year related to some of these strategies i.e. Suicide, Domestic and Sexual Violence, Drugs and Alcohol, Tobacco Action Plan, Mental Health and Learning Disability, Physical and Sensory Disability, the Department for Employment and Learning has had direct discussions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) on a number of others including the Bamford Review, work in relation to care leavers, and also the Obesity Strategy that is in process of development.

This represents a high level of commitment and co-operation in pursuit of key strategic aims and objectives and therefore no meetings or discussions with DHSSPS within the last year specifically about the overarching Investing for Health Strategy have been required. In relation to the current review of the strategy, to date my Department has been updated on and has contributed to it through correspondence.

IT Skills Courses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration he has given to increasing the number of I.T skills courses available for unemployed people in conjunction with community groups.

(AQW 4192/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department places considerable emphasis on the provision of IT skills courses, many of which are delivered in conjunction with community groups. For example, ICT was formally adopted as a third Essential Skill in August 2009, adding to the existing Essential Skills of Literacy and Numeracy. As such, anyone seeking to undertake a Level 1 or Level 2 Essential Skills ICT qualification can enrol, free of charge, with their local further education college. The colleges deliver many of these courses in community settings, subject to the availability of ICT suites in the

colleges' outreach centres. While college lecturers deliver these courses, colleges contract with a range of community organisations, whose role is to encourage "hard to reach" adults to avail of these opportunities. The provision of ICT Essential Skills is also available, where necessary, to participants in the Department's training and further education programmes.

In addition, the Department's Steps to Work programme provides a range of assistance, including access to IT skills courses, to the unemployed and those who are economically inactive. The programme is delivered through a network of Lead Contractors, a number of whom are from the community and voluntary sector.

Courses for People Aged 60 and Over

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the uptake by people aged 60 and over for courses in each Further Education College in 2008/09.

(AQW 4243/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The table below details the uptake of enrolments of those aged 60 and over in each Northern Ireland Further Education College in 2008/09.

College	Professional/ Technical Enrolments	Non Professional/ Technical Enrolments	Total
Belfast Metropolitan College	1,497	4,466	5,963
Northern Regional College	507	1,095	1,602
South Eastern Regional College	1,529	578	2,107
Southern Regional College	510	1,191	1,701
South West College	152	1,207	1,359
North West Regional College	747	1,000	1,747
Total	4,942	9,537	14,479

Source: Further Education Statistical Record.

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) which goods and services provided by his Department can be paid for online; (ii) the total number of transactions processed by his 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 4244/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: None of the goods and services provided by my Department can be paid for online. The Department for Employment and Learning provides a very limited number of services for which a charge is levied. The Department's focus is to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy. In pursuing this aim the key objectives for the Department are to promote economic, social and personal development through high quality learning, research and skills training; and to help people into employment and promote good working practices. Hence an online payment facility would be inappropriate and is therefore not in operation.

Arts and Humanities Subjects

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department has taken to promote Arts and Humanities subjects within universities.

(AQW 4262/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: As you may be aware, course provision is a matter for the respective Higher Education Institutions to determine. However, you should note that for the academic year 09/10, the University of Ulster received approximately 2800 applications for courses in the Arts and Humanities, of which just fewer than 500 were admitted. This represents 10% of the annual intake to the University. Queen's University received just over 4900 applications for Arts and Humanities courses, of which just over 880 were accepted onto a course, representing 25% of undergraduate admissions.

Therefore, as these courses are currently oversubscribed, I have no plans to further promote Arts and Humanities subjects.

You may also wish to note that, in addition to their numerous degree level and other courses, Northern Ireland's universities and colleges currently provide a wide range of recreational arts related courses.

I trust you find this information helpful.

PHD Research Students

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if the Programme For Government target to increase the number of PHD research students by 300, by 2010, will be met.

(AQW 4300/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is on course to meet this target. The first two tranches of 100 additional places were allocated and filled in Academic Years 2008/09 and 2009/10. The final tranche of 100 additional places will be allocated in Academic Year 2010/11.

Students Studying STEM Subjects

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if there has been an increase in the number of students at graduate and postgraduate level studying STEM subjects in the last year, especially those from disadvantaged communities.

(AQW 4301/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: In the 2008/09 academic year there were 21,190 first degree and postgraduate students enrolled on STEM related courses at Northern Ireland Higher Education institutions. This represents a 2% increase from the corresponding 2007/08 figure.

Of those students enrolled on STEM related courses at Northern Ireland Higher Education institutions in the 2008/09 academic year, who had known Socio Economic Classification, 26% were from groups 5, 6 and 7. This figure is the same as the 2007/08 figure, although the figures are not directly comparable.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- (1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.
- (2) The latest available data are for 2008/09.
- (3) Information about students from disadvantaged communities is monitored using Socio Economic Classification (SEC) data from HESA (which includes UCAS data). However, UCAS changed the SEC question asked of applicants between 2007 and 2008 to take account of changing age legislation and the 2008/09 figure cannot therefore be directly compared to the 2007/08 figure.
- (4) Data on SEC is only available for 53% of the 21,190 first degree and postgraduate students.

Programme-led Apprenticeships Scheme

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how many people have enrolled in the Programme-led Apprenticeships scheme; and (ii) how many places have been secured for employer placements.

(AQW 4309/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: As at 1 February 2010, the total enrolment on Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme was 2,927. On the basis of available information from training providers, including Further Education colleges, the Department has determined that approximately 50% of participants have an employer placement.

The Department is currently considering what further measures could be taken to help providers to secure additional work placements for participants on the programme.

Papers Referred to the Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list the subject matter of each of the 13 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 4331/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The detailed content of Executive papers including the agenda and minutes of the meeting are confidential.

Hughes Christensen

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) what action his Department plans to take to assist workers facing redundancy at Hughes Christensen in East Belfast to ensure they receive fair compensation and legal protection; and (ii) what services his Department will provide to assist these workers back into employment.

(AQW 4533/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) The Department has produced and updated a range of guidance materials, to provide information for workers on their employment rights, including in the case of redundancy. Companies may often have in place an agreed corporate redundancy payment scheme, which provides workers with compensation above what is statutorily required. Where this is not the case, under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, employees who are being made redundant may be entitled to a statutory redundancy payment from their employer. Employees may qualify for such a payment if they have been working under a contract of employment and have at least two years' continuous service. The final amount of any such payment depends on how long the employer has been continuously employed by his/her employer; how the employee's years of continuous service relate to a particular age band; and the employee's weekly pay, up to a maximum limit.

The Department has recently updated a guidance booklet (available at the link below or from all Jobs and Benefits Offices), which provides full details of employees' entitlements under the statutory redundancy payments scheme:

http://www.delni.gov.uk/er3_redundancy_entitlement_statutory_rights_1st_october_2009.pdf

Where an employee disagrees with his/her employer about entitlement to a redundancy payment, then the employee can take the matter to an Industrial Tribunal. The booklet also provides full details of the necessary steps in this process. The booklet also provides details of the statutory provisions that are in place, which may allow an employee who is given notice of dismissal

because of redundancy to have reasonable time off with pay during work hours, to look for another job or make arrangements for training for future employment.

The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 also places a duty on an employer proposing to make collective redundancies to consult in advance with representatives of the employees. No notices of dismissal can be issued until the consultation has been completed. Where the employer is proposing to dismiss more than 100 employees (as is the case with Hughes Christensen), then consultation must begin at least 90 days before the redundancy notices take effect. Employee representatives, trade unions, or employees who feel they have not been properly consulted or received adequate notice, may make a complaint to an Industrial Tribunal. If the Tribunal finds in the employees' favour, it may make a protective award of up to 90 days' pay. The Department's booklet at the link below contains full details of the rights and protections of employees and their representatives, to enable them to participate fully in the process of consultation, as well as information on redress, where the rights of employee representatives may have been infringed:

http://www.delni.gov.uk/er4_redundancy_consultation_and_notification_october_2009.pdf

- (ii) When companies face redundancies, the DEL district management team works in partnership with organisations such as the local Further Education College, lead Training Providers, Education and Guidance Service, and the Social Security Agency to offer a full range of services to those affected by the redundancy. These services include advice on employment, education, training, reskilling, job search and benefit advice.

In previous redundancy situations within this company, DEL organised redundancy clinics to offer support and advice to those employees affected. DEL's district management team is currently in discussions with Hughes Christensen, to arrange a suitable date for a similar Redundancy Clinic.

The Further Education Sector's Rapid Response NI programme, which is funded by the Department, has already provided a range of support services to Hughes Christensen. To date, the programme has engaged with 46 of the company's employees and, as a result, a range of support programmes have been scheduled for delivery.

Executive Papers

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how many policy and discussion papers he has brought before the Executive in relation to Further and Higher Education; (ii) the date the papers were brought forward; and (iii) how many of these papers resulted in legislation going before the Assembly. **(AQW 4610/10)**

Minister for Employment and Learning: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The detailed content of Executive papers, including the agenda and minutes of the meeting, are confidential.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment 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 4293/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): My Department's Insolvency Service and Invest Northern Ireland both operate an online purchase facility for certain services.

DETI's Company Registry Branch also offered the purchase of company documents online. This is now provided by Companies House, Cardiff following the transfer of this function from DETI in Oct 2009.

The number of transactions and method of payment for each service is set out in the following tables.

Invest NI

Invest NI provides one service with an online payment option, a series of workshops called 'Passport to Export'. This is a one day export skills training workshop open to all companies.

TABLE 1

(i) goods and services provided which can be paid for online	(ii) total no. of transactions processed				
	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10 to Dec09
Invest NI workshop event bookings (no. of delegates booked)	408	304	455	429	318

TABLE 2

(iii) Method of payment and percentage for each of the transactions					
	On-line Payments*	Cheque*	Postal Order	Cash	Other
2005/06	148	260	-	-	-
2006/07	173	131	-	-	-
2007/08	203	252	-	-	-
2008/09	139	290	-	-	-
2009/10	103	215	-	-	-
Total	766	1148	-	-	-
Percentage	40%	60%	-	-	-

* Number of delegates paid for by this method

Insolvency Service

TABLE 1

(i) goods and services provided which can be paid for online	(ii) total no. of transactions processed				
	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10
Deposits in respect of bankruptcy and winding up petitions (available from November 2006).	1228	1512	1638	1952	1324

TABLE 2

(iii) Method of payment and percentage for each of the transactions					
	On-line Payments	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other
2005/06	System only in place from 01/11/06	See note below	Nil	See note below	Nil
2006/07	Nil	See note below	Nil	See note below	Nil
2007/08	Nil	See note below	Nil	See note below	Nil
2008/09	Nil	See note below	Nil	See note below	Nil
2009/10	Nil	See note below	Nil	See note below	Nil
Total	Nil	See note below	Nil	See note below	Nil
Percentage	0%	See note below	0%	See note below	0%

The cost of ascertaining the method of payment would involve manually checking through over 7,500 individual payments and would, therefore, be disproportionate.

Companies Registry

TABLE 1

(i) goods and services provided which can be paid for online	(ii) total no. of transactions processed				
	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10
Purchase of copy company documents. (1)	6,376	15,169	18,661	20,791	10,337

Note 1:

Service commenced during November 2005 and ceased with effect from 1 Oct 2009 following transfer of all Company Registry functions from DETI to Companies House, Cardiff

TABLE 2

(iii) Method of payment and percentage for each of the transactions					
	On-line Payments	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other
2005/06	3,473	See note (2)	See note (2)	See note (2)	2,903
2006/07	14,598	See note (2)	See note (2)	See note (2)	571
2007/08	18,324	See note (2)	See note (2)	See note (2)	337
2008/09	20,507	See note (2)	See note (2)	See note (2)	284
2009/10	10,145	See note (2)	See note (2)	See note (2)	192
Total	67,047	See note (2)	See note (2)	See note (2)	4,287
Percentage	94%	N/A	N/A	N/A	6%

Note 2:

No information on method of payment is available. Figures shown as "Other" represent number of payments made for copy documents via the Public Office.

Avanti Communications

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) for her assessment of the performance of Avanti Communications in delivering the services agreed under the terms of the satellite broadband contract; (ii) whether Avanti Communications has sufficient satellite broadband capacity to meet current user needs; and (iii) the number of complaints Avanti Communications has received regarding access to satellite broadband from (a) businesses; and (b) home users since it took over the contract from British Telecom.

(AQW 4359/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI has commissioned consultancy firm Analysys Mason to independently monitor Avanti Communication's performance in delivering the services specified in its contract with the Department. Analysys Mason has submitted three reports to date and noted that Avanti is delivering services in line with the contract.

With regard to bandwidth capacity, DETI has sought and has received assurances from Avanti that it has sufficient capacity to meet the needs of its current users. Avanti monitors and forecasts capacity requirements on an ongoing basis and will increase network capacity as required to ensure that it complies with the performance criteria of its contracts with end-users. The last capacity increase was conducted in December 2009 flowing from Avanti's consideration of forecast requirements for the first half of 2010.

In relation to the number of complaints received, since installation of Avanti services commenced in February 2009, 87 complaints have been received from 43 customers located in Northern Ireland. These are not high numbers when taken in the context that, to end December 2009, Avanti had installed services for 787 customers in NI. It is not possible to show the complaints figure separately for business and home users as many home packages are being used by small businesses.

People Aged 50 and Above Currently in Employment

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of people aged 50 and above currently in employment; and for the equivalent figure in each of the last five years.
(AQW 4390/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below provides estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for the proportion of those aged 50 and over who are in employment in each of the last five years. Estimates for those aged 50 to state pension age are also provided for information.

EMPLOYMENT RATES¹ FOR THOSE AGED OVER 50, 2005 - 2009

Period	Proportion in employment Aged 50+	Proportion in employment Aged 50 - 59/64 ²
Jul-Sep 2005	33.9%	62.1%
Jul-Sep 2006	33.7%	61.1%
Jul-Sep 2007	32.7%	59.9%
Jul-Sep 2008	32.3%	59.7%
Jul-Sep 2009	33.1%	61.2%

Source: Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey (LFS).

- 1 The LFS is a sample survey and the estimates from it are therefore subject to sampling error.
- 2 Pre 2010 the state pension age was 59 for females and 64 for males.

Vision for the North East Area

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why the Northern Ireland Tourist Board did not invite a representative from Moyle District Council to attend the meeting about a 'Vision for the North East area' on 19 January 2010, when representatives from Larne, Ballymena and Coleraine Councils were invited.

(AQW 4423/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The recent meeting was an informal discussion around a range of issues and just one part of NITBs ongoing engagement programme with tourism partners across Northern Ireland to assist in better understanding local priorities, key product strengths and how everyone can work better together to maximize opportunities. Tourism is a huge industry with a broad range of stakeholders, and it is impossible to meaningfully meet with every partner in one meeting which is why there is an ongoing programme of both formal and informal meetings and events.

At the meeting on 19th January several tourism businesses within the Moyle area were represented. There will be further meetings and events in the future as part of NITBs ongoing engagement strategy with as many stakeholders in the area as possible, including Moyle District Council.

Vision for the North East Area

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) if the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has apologised, or intends to apologise, to Moyle District Council for excluding it from the 'Vision for the North East area' meeting on 19 January 2010; (ii) if a reasonable explanation has been given; and (iii) to outline the criteria used when drawing up the invitation list.

(AQW 4424/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The recent meeting was an informal discussion and just one part of NITBs ongoing engagement programme with tourism partners across Northern Ireland to assist in better understanding local priorities, key product strengths and how everyone can work better together to maximize opportunities.

The NITB Chief Executive spoke with the Chief Executive of Moyle District Council on 29th January 2010 to outline the steps NITB is taking to try and increase its engagement with stakeholders across Northern Ireland. Tourism is a huge industry with a broad range of stakeholders and when meeting for discussion or at events it is not possible to include every partner on every occasion.

At the meeting on 19th January 2010 NITB sought to meet with a mix of public and private sector tourism partners and representative bodies from across the sector, and several tourism businesses within the Moyle area were represented.

Tourism Meetings

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has carried out an Equality Impact Assessment on its policy of inviting relevant parties and groups for tourism meetings and events held by the Chief Executive.

(AQW 4425/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NITB does not operate a specific policy regarding invitees to meetings and events. In response to recent stakeholder research NITB is seeking to increase its ongoing programme of engagement particularly in the regions across Northern Ireland.

The context for our engagement is to maximise the opportunities for local and regional tourism development within a national framework of identified priorities. Tourism offers unparalleled potential to generate growth and jobs for Northern Ireland but faces the challenge of getting the vast range of government and industry agencies and organisations involved in tourism delivery to work better together in partnership with the private sector to pool efforts and resources to a common vision and goal.

NITB always attempts to engage as wide a spectrum of interests and providers within the tourism sector including, but not limited to, local councils, accommodation providers, event organisers, carriers, visitor attractions and developers.

Geothermal Energy

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what contact she has had with the Utility Regulator regarding (i) geothermal energy; and (ii) the need for the regulator to accommodate the setting up of a geothermal energy network.

(AQW 4455/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has had no discussions with the Utility Regulator on geothermal energy specifically or the setting up of a geothermal energy network.

DETI is however engaged with the Utility Regulator and other Departments on a project to examine the potential for renewable heat in Northern Ireland, which includes scoping out any potential contribution from geothermal energy.

DETI also chairs a cross departmental group on renewable heat which brings together expertise in the field and this group may consider geothermal issues as they emerge.

Geothermal Energy

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if and when she will introduce a regulatory regime for the development of geothermal energy.

(AQW 4456/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has no plans to introduce a regulatory regime to assist in the development of geothermal energy.

Current work underway in my Department to assess the potential for renewable heat in Northern Ireland needs to be completed so that the contribution that geothermal energy might play in the energy mix here can be fully identified.

Geothermal Energy

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she expects all barriers to the development of geothermal energy to be removed by 2012.

(AQW 4457/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment recognises that there are a number of legislative, technical and financial barriers to the development of geothermal energy in Northern Ireland.

Work to date on deep geothermal energy has been led by the Department's Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) and has addressed the issues of regulatory barriers and the risks associated with inadequate knowledge of the potential deep geothermal energy resource. GSNI is currently carrying out geophysical and geological research, under the Innovation Fund, aimed at reducing these risks.

GSNI has been a partner in an EU-funded project, Geothermal Regulations – Heat (GTR-H), which produced a Geothermal Energy Regulatory Framework, in November 2009, for use as a template for those countries without adequate legislation for geothermal energy exploration, development and production.

DETI is currently undertaking research into the potential for the development of a renewable heat market in Northern Ireland. The research will consider all types of renewable heat, including geothermal, and the measures needed to develop such a market.

Fuel Bills

Mr G Adams asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she has any plans to introduce a mandatory social tariff to permit money off fuel bills for people who are eligible, including vulnerable cancer patients.

(AQW 4492/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In response to Executive concerns about the impact of high energy costs on vulnerable consumers the Utility Regulator agreed to take forward work to establish the scope for regulatory action to make tariff changes aimed at helping to address fuel poverty. On 18 January 2010, the Regulator's Office issued a consultation paper entitled 'Assisting with Affordability Concerns for Vulnerable Energy Consumers' The consultation, which runs until 12 April, aims to identify the key issues that need to be debated and considered in the formulation of policy options for introducing 'affordability tariffs' within the Northern Ireland energy sector.

However, the impact of any tariff changes in Northern Ireland will need to be considered carefully, not least with regard to the proportion of consumers in need of assistance and the stage of development of competition in the energy market.

Social Economy Enterprises

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the application by the Ulster Community Investment Trust to Invest NI to secure investment for social economy enterprises.

(AQW 4527/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI met the Ulster Community Investment Trust (UCIT) in January to discuss the business case they had presented for additional loan fund capital and to identify other possible options for UCIT to consider taking forward. These options include broader Departmental interest, consolidation with other loan funds and an interest in a new EU Microfinance facility.

I understand that Invest NI are scheduled to meet UCIT again on 15 February 2010 to update on progress and advise of Invest NI's position.

Hughes Christensen

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what action her Department took to prevent the recent job losses at Hughes Christensen in East Belfast; and (ii) what action her Department is taking to ensure that workers are able to secure new employment.

(AQW 4568/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) Invest NI, on my behalf, has been in close liaison with the Local Management Team of Hughes Christensen throughout, and prior to, the current period of recession. In 2007, Invest NI provided assistance to attract a new mobile project to the Plant. The introduction of the Polydiamond Carbonate Drill Bit Production Line was intended to strengthen the Plant's competitive position within the Group by widening its product portfolio beyond Tri-cone Drill Bits.

Since then, up until the end of December 2009, a number of different schemes were discussed with the local management team in an effort to minimise the impact of global recession on the plant. However, despite this due to significant ongoing overcapacity in the market, the Senior US Management Team was forced into instigating redundancies in 2009. Invest NI Officials and those from the Department for Employment and Learning continued to liaise with the Local Management Team during this period with a view to intervening as appropriate.

Regrettably, on the 28th January 2010, representatives from the Senior US Management Team informed Invest NI that they had decided to enter into 90 day consultation with a view to possible

factory closure. Invest NI are continuing to liaise with the Senior US Management Team in relation to this. No further comment can be made at this stage.

- (ii) Invest NI in association with the Department for Employment and Learning are continuing to liaise with the local management team and have already offered to assist employees explore other employment options. The Local Management Team have indicated that they will draw down on these services when appropriate.

Land at Melmount Road, Strabane

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a timescale for the completion of the acquisition of the 11.5 hectares of land at Melmount Road, Strabane, for the development of a Business Park.

(AQW 4569/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In seeking to address the lack of available industrial land in the Strabane district Invest NI is actively progressing a strategic project to acquire new land.

In August 2009 the agency submitted two planning applications (full and outline) seeking approval for the development of a new business park in the district. A c44 acres gross site at Melmount Road has been identified as the preferred location, its acquisition, however, is dependent upon Invest NI achieving acceptable planning approval and expiry of the statutory juridical review period for the proposed development.

Prior to the submission of the applications Invest NI engaged with both Planning Service and other key stakeholders through the Pre Application Discussion process. Invest NI is hopeful that this engagement will assist Planning Service with its consultation process and enable an early decision to be provided.

Invest NI will continue to work with Planning Service, the council and key stakeholders to achieve a successful outcome.

Avaya

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department has given any financial assistance to the U.S. company Avaya.

(AQW 4572/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: No financial assistance agreement was ever entered into between Avaya and Invest NI. As such, no grant assistance has ever been paid by Invest NI to Avaya.

Department of the Environment

Salting and Gritting: Impact on Fresh Waterways

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what is the environmental impact on fresh waterways of the prolonged periods of salting and gritting of roads.

(AQW 4303/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): There are minimal short-term impacts to the ecology of watercourses, from de-icing/gritting and the salt input to rivers is not prolonged enough to cause significant long-term damage. As salt from roads tends to enter watercourses during a thaw, it is diluted relatively quickly. Northern Ireland Environment Agency carries out an extensive freshwater biological monitoring programme, sampling rivers and streams, and have found no evidence of significant impact on aquatic wildlife from the addition of salt and grit to roads.

Fred Fraser: Developments Owned

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any planning enforcement actions initiated on developments owned by Fred Fraser or associated companies, in each of the last 20 years.

(AQW 4345/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department's records indicate that since 2000 no enforcement action has been taken against the late Mr Fred Fraser or any of his known associated companies.

To provide accurate figures for the information requested over the last 20 years would require a manual check of records which is disproportionate in terms of time and cost.

Planning Applications

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any representations made by Peter Robinson MP, MLA to his Department since 2000, in relation to planning applications by (i) Ken Campbell or associated companies; and (ii) Fred Fraser or associated companies.

(AQW 4346/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department's records indicate that since 2000 Mr Peter Robinson made no representations to planning applications by Ken Campbell or associated companies and no representations to planning applications by Fred Fraser or associated companies.

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.

As it is not uncommon for developers to establish a company to deal with a specific development proposal 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.

Release of Whitelands at Millmount, Dundonald

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any representations made by Peter Robinson MP, MLA to his Department, in relation to the release of Whitelands at Millmount, Dundonald, for housing development.

(AQW 4347/10)

Minister of the Environment: According to the report on the Public Inquiry under Article 31 on the major planning applications for housing development on Belfast Urban Area Plan Whiteland between the development limit and inner edge of the Green Belt no representations were submitted by Peter Robinson MP, MLA.

Craigmore Landfill Site

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many site inspections has the Northern Ireland Environment Agency carried out on the Craigmore landfill site, near Garvagh, in the last three months; and (ii) how many complaints have been received about the site.

(AQW 4366/10)

Minister of the Environment:

- 1) NIEA has carried out 5 site inspections on the Craigmore landfill site, in the last three months. Odour has been detected on 4 occasions and the operator has been asked to submit a gas management plan.
- 2) NIEA has received 16 complaints since the site opened in October 2008. One complaint in 2008 regarding a tear in the netting system which was quickly repaired. There were 12 complaints in 2009, 7 of which were about odour. Agency staff recorded a slight odour on the site however there was no evidence of off-site odour. The other complaints were about out-of-hour's activity and these were passed to the Planning Service for their attention. Since the start of 2010 there have been 3 complaints all in relation to odour. The operator has been asked to submit capping and gas proposals.

Council Chief Executives

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to make council Chief Executives more accountable to him for their actions and decisions.
(AQW 4369/10)

Minister of the Environment: Council Chief Executives are employed by the individual councils and as such, they are fully accountable to their employing council for their actions and decisions. I am willing to consider proposals for change as part of RPA.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of the Environment when he will make a final decision on whether to hold a public enquiry on the extension of the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport.
(AQW 4371/10)

Minister of the Environment: The application to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport is still under consideration by my officials in Planning Service and I await their report. I hope to be in a position to make a decision on the procedural route that will be taken shortly.

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of the Environment for an estimate of the percentage of his annual budget which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.
(AQW 4388/10)

Minister of the Environment: During this year approximately 48% (£83,792,950) of my Department's gross annual budget (£174,423,000) will be directed towards preventative and early intervention measures. Measures taken include monitoring of water quality and waste management in order to prevent environmental damage, the provision of grants to prevent deterioration of built heritage and the environment, prevention of unauthorised development through the development management process and improving road safety which contributes to the prevention of road casualties and reduction of vehicle crime.

Green Grave Burial System

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if the new pre-formed Green Grave burial system complies with burial regulations.
(AQW 4406/10)

Minister of the Environment: While my Department has responsibility for the Burial Ground Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992, it is not for my Department to determine whether the new pre-formed Greengrave burial system would comply with those Regulations. The Regulations require district councils to comply with certain conditions of burial and it is for them to decide if such pre-formed burial systems would meet those conditions.

Landfill Sites in the Ringsend Area of County Derry

Mr B Leonard asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the need for three landfill sites in the Ringsend area of County Derry in the context of (i) recessionary pressures; and (ii) increased recycling resulting in less landfill waste.
(AQW 4426/10)

Minister of the Environment: There is currently one landfill in the Ringsend area which is being operated by a private sector contractor. A further two applications for landfills are with planning service and are being processed.

One of the two applications relates to the Cam Road site which has been identified by the North West Region Waste Management Group (NWRWMG) in its waste management plan as the preferred option

for disposal of municipal waste in this region, following a rigorous site selection process which included public consultation and meetings.

The other application relates to a proposed inert landfill to be operated by another private sector contractor. This application has to fulfil the need criteria set out in Policy WM 3 (Waste Disposal) of Planning and Policy Statement 11.

Recycling rates in Northern Ireland have increased from some 5% in 1999 to some 35% currently, and must reach a minimum of 50% by 2020. Increased recycling will undoubtedly further reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.

This reduction and the potential impact of the recession are factors that the NWRWMG and the private sector contractor will need to take into account when considering the need for additional landfill facilities

Planning Applications

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of planning applications submitted where the proposed site was in an area of high scenic value in each of the last 10 years; and (ii) the number of these applications which were approved.

(AQW 4440/10)

Minister of the Environment: Areas of high scenic value are designated to protect areas of landscape merit and are currently found in the following Development Plans:-

- Draft BMAP 2015
- Derry Area Plan 2011
- Draft Magherafelt Area Plan 2015
- Ards and Down Area Plan 2015

In each of the last 10 years the number of applications submitted where the site was in an area of high scenic value and the number of these which were approved, refused, withdrawn and which are currently being processed are as follows:-

APPLICATIONS SUBMITTED WITHIN AREAS OF HIGH SCENIC VALUE

Year Received	Volume Received	Withdrawn	Approved	Refused	Live
2000	197	20	142	34	1
2001	201	29	146	24	0
2002	213	17	169	26	1
2003	238	27	162	48	0
2004	243	27	165	48	1
2005	190	19	147	23	0
2006	198	19	166	10	2
2007	218	20	170	9	19
2008	167	11	137	4	15
2009	129	6	91	5	27
Total	1994	195	1495	231	66

Source: MVM 20/20 Planner

1. Withdrawn, Approved, Refused and Live application figures are based on the applications received within that year.
2. Only full, outline and reserved matters have been included in the above figures.
3. These figures have been extracted from a live dataset which is continuously updated and validated. They should therefore be regarded as indicative only at this point in time and should not be compared with any previous figures published by the Agency.

Road Deaths

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what new initiatives his Department is considering to address the problem of road fatalities.

(AQO 683/10)

Minister of the Environment: In the near future, I will be consulting on the development of a new road safety strategy to be introduced before the end of the year. The draft paper is with the Executive and I will be discussing it with the Environment Committee on Thursday.

Officials have engaged with road safety partners and other interested parties in developing over 170 possible measures to improve safety on our roads. These measures, along with proposed new targets and performance indicators will inform the upcoming public consultation.

My officials are working on a programme of proposals to change our driver training and testing systems. The key objective of the "Learning To Drive" proposals is to reduce the number of young and novice drivers killed or seriously injured by better preparing them to cope with the challenges of driving unsupervised in modern conditions.

I also intend to consult shortly on Graduated Driver Licensing to reduce the exposure to risk for new drivers and to improve driving standards in Northern Ireland. These measures could place certain restrictions on learner and restricted drivers which will gradually be lifted as the driver gains more experience. Amongst the measures, I am considering would be changes to the current 45 mph speed restriction on learner and replacing the current 'R' driver scheme.

I was heartened by the strong support for lowering the limits following the public consultation on drink driving carried out last year. I have already indicated my willingness to reduce the limit.

Earlier this month the PSNI called for powers to seize vehicles from drink drive offenders and referred to powers already in place in Scotland. I am prepared to look at this and have already asked my officials to work with the NIO, PSNI and the Courts Service to determine the experience in Scotland with such powers and the nature and extent of any powers that might be applicable here.

Planning Reform

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on planning reform.

(AQO 689/10)

Minister of the Environment: Members will be aware that the wide-ranging proposals for reform of the planning system, including the measures necessary to transfer planning functions to the new district councils in 2011, were subject to public consultation from July – October last year.

Almost 500 people, representing a wide-range of sectors and organisations, attended one or more of the consultation events and 264 formal written responses were received. As you can imagine, the comments and responses received reflected a vast array of, often conflicting, viewpoints. Nevertheless, in general terms there was broad support for the vast majority of the reform proposals.

Following the public consultation I have now formulated my final policy position, taking full account of the views expressed through the consultation, and subsequently submitted these policy proposals to Executive colleagues for consideration on 7 January 2010, with a view to seeking clearance at an Executive meeting as soon as possible thereafter. Members will appreciate that I am not in a position to advise on the detailed final policy position in advance of Executive clearance. Subject to Executive

agreement, the final policy position will be made public thereafter and we can then move forward with the legislative process.

Given the extremely tight legislative timescale to which we are working it is essential that Executive clearance of the final policy is secured in the coming weeks if we are to remain on course to deliver the reforms by the 2011 deadline.

Clean Neighbourhoods

Lord Browne asked the Minister of the Environment when consultation will begin on the clean neighbourhoods legislation.

(AQO 690/10)

Minister of the Environment: Subject to Executive clearance I would very much like to commence the consultation exercise on a draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill in February.

Road Safety: Speed Cameras

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment how Speed Enforcement Camera Systems have improved road safety.

(AQO 692/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Safety Camera Scheme was launched on 1st July 2003. As part of the first phase of the scheme there were 4 fixed camera sites, 31 mobile camera sites and 33 mobile camera routes.

Data was collected over the 3 years immediately prior to the launch and compared with the 3 years subsequent to the launch. These data demonstrated a 41% reduction in the number of fatal or serious injury collisions and a 36% reduction in the number of people killed or seriously injured at these sites.

The decline in the number of fatal or serious injury collisions at sites not covered by the scheme was around 20.5% over the same period.

In the 2002/03 Financial Year there were 169 fatal or serious injury collisions at the sites. In 2008/2009 there were 76 fatal or serious injury collisions; a reduction of 55%. The decline in the number of fatal or serious injury collisions in Northern Ireland generally, was around 24.5% over the same period.

These are significant reductions and a clear demonstration that safety cameras, both fixed and mobile, reduce fatal or serious injury collisions.

Learner Drivers: Illegal Instruction

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how many incidents of illegal instruction of learner drivers have been detected in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4485/10)

Minister of the Environment: Since the PSNI is the prosecuting authority for cases of illegal driving instruction, my Department may not be aware of every incident. However, the Driver & Vehicle Agency, which maintains the register of approved driving instructors, is aware of two cases of illegal or unregistered instruction that were detected and prosecuted in 2007 and of one further case that is now pending.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Central Procurement Directorate Staff

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many staff within Central Procurement Directorate have been subject to (i) internal investigation; (ii) disciplinary measures; (iii) demotion; or (iv) termination of contract, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4073/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The information requested is as follows:

- (i)* NIL
- (ii) NIL
- (iii) NIL
- (iv) NIL

* includes Dignity at Work and discipline investigations.

Response period 1 February 2007 – 31 January 2010.

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) which goods and services provided by his Department can be paid for online; (ii) the total number of transactions processed by his 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 4246/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Details of the relevant goods and services, together with the transaction data and percentages requested for the Department of Finance and Personnel (including its agencies) for the last five financial years are provided in the attached tables.

The information is provided on the basis of the last five complete financial years representing the basis of preparation of the Department's accounts.

2008/09

Type of goods/ services provided by DFP that can be paid for online	Total number of these transactions processed during 2008/09						% of payments made online
	Online	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other Method	Total	
General Register Office Certificate Applications	6,001	10,214	4,387	16,358	28,886	65,846	9.11
LandWeb Direct Services	317,920	3,523	0	880	0	322,323	98.63
Supply of Mapping Products*	11,180	5,600	0	0	1,000	17,780	62.88

* Information on the numbers of mapping transactions made via other payment methods is not readily available. Data provided above is based on a manual exercise providing a best estimate.

2007/08

Type of goods/ services provided by DFP that can be paid for online	Total number of these transactions processed during 2007/08						% of payments made online
	Online	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other Method	Total	
General Register Office Certificate Applications	12,577	12,744	5,884	18,661	24,618	74,484	16.89
LandWeb Direct Services	382,574	4,428	0	1,106	0	388,108	98.57
Supply of Mapping Products*	18,248						

* Information on the numbers of mapping transactions made via other payment methods is not readily available.

2006/07

Type of goods/ services provided by DFP that can be paid for online	Total number of these transactions processed during 2006/07						% of payments made online
	Online	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other Method	Total	
General Register Office Certificate Applications	15,357	15,474	7,110	21,154	18,912	78,007	19.69
LandWeb Direct Services	362,177	5,891	0	1,496	0	369,564	98.00
Supply of Mapping Products*	9,562						

* Information on the numbers of mapping transactions made via other payment methods is not readily available.

2005/06

Type of goods/ services provided by DFP that can be paid for online	Total number of these transactions processed during 2005/06						% of payments made online
	Online	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other Method	Total	
General Register Office Certificate Applications*	*	14,102	6,339	19,477	25,460*	65,378	*

Type of goods/ services provided by DFP that can be paid for online	Total number of these transactions processed during 2005/06						% of payments made online
	Online	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other Method	Total	
LandWeb Direct Services	283,967	5,680	0	1,420	0	291,067	97.56
Supply of Mapping Products	Mapping services did not become available online until 2006/07						

* All telephone and online general register office certificate applications during the 2005/06 financial year were recorded as credit card payments, and hence fall within the "other method" category.

2004/05

Type of goods/ services provided by DFP that can be paid for online	Total number of these transactions processed during 2004/05						% of payments made online
	Online	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other Method	Total	
General Register Office Certificate Applications*	Breakdown by transaction type not readily available.						
LandWeb Direct Services	190,216	6,884	0	1,721	0	198,821	95.67
Supply of Mapping Products	Mapping services did not become available online until 2006/07						

Building Regulations: Consultations

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the consultations carried out by his Department since August 2009 on (i) existing Building Regulations; and (ii) new Regulations introduced in 2009.

(AQW 4274/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: There have been no consultations carried out on existing Building Regulations since August 2009.

There were no new Regulations introduced in 2009, however the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 (SR 2010 No. 1) were made on 4 January 2010, and will come into effect on 31 March 2010.

Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he plans to alter Part F (Conservation of Fuel and power) of the Building Regulations (NI) 2000 to provide for further reductions in the Carbon Emission Rate of 25% by 2010 and 44% by 2013, as is planned for the rest of the UK.

(AQW 4275/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The figures quoted above are the regulatory targets proposed for the England & Wales building regulations. My officials continue to work closely with their counterparts in the Department of Communities and Local Government to examine the outcome of their consultation paper on this proposal for England & Wales and to finalise the calculation methodologies and technical detail for their amendment.

Once this work has been concluded, officials will consult on proposals for an appropriate and comparative set of regulations for Northern Ireland, to come into effect as soon after England & Wales as possible. It would not be appropriate to pre-empt the outcome of the consultation.

Birth Rate

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for (i) the birth rate in each of the last five years; (ii) the projection for the next two years; and (iii) the number of non-national children registered in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4297/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Table 1 below shows the annual birth rate¹ between 2004 and 2008 and the projected the annual birth rate¹ between 2009 and 2011.

Birth registration does not record nationality; the nearest proxy is country of birth. Table 2 gives the number of births registered in Northern Ireland from 2004 to 2009 Q1-Q3P where the parent(s) country of birth is outside the UK and Ireland.

TABLE 1: ACTUAL AND PROJECTED BIRTH RATES¹, 2004-2011

Registration Year	Birth Rate ¹
2004	60.6
2005	60.4
2006	62.5
2007	65.1
2008	68.2
2009 projection	67.2
2010 projection	67.1
2011 projection	67.1

TABLE 2: BIRTHS REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND TO PARENT(S) BORN OUTSIDE THE UK AND IRELAND, 2004-2009 QUARTER 1-QUARTER 3 (Q1-Q3^P).

Registration Year	Births to parent(s) born outside the UK and Ireland	All Resident Live Births Registered
2004	671	22,318
2005	614	22,328
2006	921	23,272
2007	1,351	24,451
2008	1,726	25,631
2009 Q1-Q3P	1,335	18,943

1 Number of births per 1,000 women aged 15-44, P Provisional data

Valuation of Properties in New Developments

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to speed up the process of valuation of properties in new developments to allow householders to apply for rates reductions. **(AQW 4319/10)**

Minister of Finance and Personnel: District Valuers within Land & Property Services (LPS) aim to value all new houses and enter these in the Valuation List as soon as a property is capable of occupation. LPS is specifically targeting a reduction in the number of new houses awaiting inspection and valuation and is making substantial improvements. LPS works closely with all district councils, in particular their Building Control Offices, to assist in targeting completions.

Although new houses are constantly added to the workload, the total number of outstanding cases continues to reduce. The table below illustrates the current position and the progress being made.

NEW HOUSES AWAITING SURVEY AND VALUATION

Date	Total Number Awaiting Completion
As at 31 March 2008	8,644
As at 31 March 2009	5,228
As at 31 January 2010	2,653

LPS recognises the impact of backdated rate bills on ratepayers, and seeks to offer extended payment arrangements in such cases where this is requested by ratepayers. LPS also works with ratepayers to ensure that the benefits and reliefs available to ratepayers are applied for the full period of entitlement.

Capital Projects

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for a breakdown of spending on capital projects in this financial year to date. **(AQW 4321/10)**

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Capital investment covers a wide range of expenditure and thousands of individual projects. The information routinely provided by Departments in financial monitoring returns does not therefore separately identify each individual project.

Consequently, the information required to provide a reply to your question is not held centrally within the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and could only be obtained comprehensively across all Departments at disproportionate cost.

Regarding my own Department, DFP Properties Division has indicated that it has planned to incur expenditure across a number of capital projects during the financial year 2009/10. These projects are listed at Annex A.

ANNEX A

Department of Finance And Personnel (AQW 4321/10)

CAPITAL INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT - TOTAL EXPENDITURE 2009/2010 DFP - PROPERTIES DIVISION

Project Title	Location	Total Estimated Spend 2009/2010 £m
New Building for DRD Roads Service.	Cookstown	0.360

Project Title	Location	Total Estimated Spend 2009/2010 £m
Fit Out for DFP Properties Division, Causeway Exchange.	Belfast	0.519
Goodwood House, Refurbishment of Floors 6, 7 and 8.	Belfast	0.390
Glasshouses, Stormont Estate.	Belfast	0.030
Longbridge House, Waring Street.	Belfast	0.100
Total Estimated Spend 2009/2010		1.399

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if they can confirm that there will not be an underspend on the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2.

(AQW 4322/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2 (ISNI2) covers the period 2008-2018. The figures published for the first three years reflect the capital investment allocations made to departments in Budget 2008-11. However, the ISNI shows gross capital investment whereas departmental budgets are set net of capital receipts.

The years 2011-2018 shown in the ISNI are indicative, for planning purposes only, as allocations can only be confirmed once funding has been agreed with the Treasury through the Spending Review process.

Departmental spending performance is measured annually against their final plan position for the year. This position incorporates changes to departmental budgets that have been agreed by the Executive through the in-year monitoring process.

In my statement to the Assembly on 7 July 2009, I announced that in 2008-09 departments delivered some £1.5 billion of net capital investment. This position reflected an overspend of £16.6 million against final plan. This was due to the fact that the Department for Regional Development incurred an overspend in respect of additional costs arising from the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water, while the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had an overspend in relation to the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme. In both cases the Executive was aware of the potential for further costs to be incurred.

Provisional Outturn information for 2009-10 will not be available until June/July this year. The position for 2010-11 is currently being reviewed by the Executive.

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of the percentage of his annual budget which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.

(AQW 4324/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: In 2008/09 my department spent an estimated 1.8% of its annual budget on planned preventative maintenance on the NICS office estate.

Water Charges: Cost of Deferring

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for a breakdown of the estimated £210m cost of deferring water charges in 2010/11, giving non-cash costs and revenue shortfall.

(AQW 4327/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is no simple breakdown of the £210m funding requirement. This represents the difference between the Budget 2008-11 allocation for NI Water (NIW) and the latest Budget requirement. The Budget 2008-11 position accounted for NIW as a Government owned Company (GoCo) and was based on full domestic charging having been introduced. The latest budget requirement now identified for 2010-11 takes account of the fact that domestic charging has not been introduced and NIW is being accounted for as an NDPB. This funding requirement should be firmed up once the Executive has considered the final determination of the Price Control (PC10) and assesses the appropriate funding envelope for NIW for the next three years.

Approximately £72m of the overall net cost of deferring domestic water charging relates to depreciation (non cash cost) and is due to the reclassification from GoCo to NDPB. The remainder is primarily due to the net lost income.

Civil Servants: Flights

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 3801/10, to explain why his Department's travel desk deems it unnecessary to record the number of flights booked for staff that go unused.

(AQW 4357/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Given that the number of flights booked for civil servants in DFP but not used is relatively low, the cost of implementing an administrative system to record, collate and monitor them would not represent value for money. My Department is required to operate efficiently and to keep its administration costs to a minimum.

Building Regulations: Consultations

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any consultations planned for 2010 on (i) new Building Regulations; or (ii) Amendments to existing Building Regulations.

(AQW 4376/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are three consultations planned for 2010 on both existing and new building regulations, namely:

- An amendment to the Building Regulations (NI) 2000 that addresses issues relating to the lifespan of building regulations approval and how it should apply to applications for more than one dwelling. The proposed amendment will also clarify certain issues relating to the application of Parts F (Conservation of fuel and power) and E (Fire safety) of the Regulations. This consultation is currently planned for Spring 2010;
- An amendment to the Building (Prescribed Fees) Regulations (NI) 1997, that will address the level of fees payable and other mechanisms relating to the fee structure; and
- Proposals for new Building Regulations that consolidate previous regulations and implement changes brought about by the Building Regulations (Amendment) Act 2009. The consultation will also include proposals for technical uplifts to four parts of the regulations, namely Part C (Preparation of site and resistance to moisture), Part F (Conservation of fuel and power), Part G (Sound insulation), and Part K (Ventilation).

It is anticipated that consultation on the latter two proposals will take place in the second half of 2010.

Fairtrade Products

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, further to his commitment to ensure that all new catering contracts specify that Fairtrade products must be made available in new buildings and at official functions, how many contracts have been awarded in accordance with this criteria since this commitment was given; and to list these contracts.

(AQW 4383/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Since the original commitment was given in 2006, all contractors supplying catering services to the Northern Ireland Civil Service have been required to provide fair trade products for hospitality services and to offer, where appropriate, fair trade products for purchase by staff. This requirement was included in all new contracts and also in those contracts which were extended.

7 new contracts have been awarded since 2006 for catering services in the following buildings:- Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Agri-Food and Bioscience Institute Northern Ireland (AFBINI), Great Northern Tower, Goodwood House, Stormont Castle, Clare House and College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

Staff Uniforms

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what proportion of staff uniforms purchased through central procurement contracts are made from Fairtrade fabrics.

(AQW 4384/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) do not have any arrangements for the procurement of staff uniforms for the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of the percentage of the budget for all Government Departments which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.

(AQW 4389/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel does not collect data from Northern Ireland departments in respect of the amount of funding directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.

The broad range of activities that could possibly be considered as relating to preventative and early intervention measures, and the absence of a precise definition encompassing all public services, means that it is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of the amount of funding that is allocated for this purpose.

Capital Investment

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the expected net capital investment of £1.5bn, as set out in March 2009 by the previous Minister, was spent by the Executive in 2008/09.

(AQW 4396/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: My statement to the Assembly on 7 July 2009 informed members that £1.5bn of net capital expenditure was reported by Northern Ireland departments for 2008-09 at Provisional Outturn.

Procurement and Tendering Procedures

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how his Department is improving procurement and tendering procedures to provide opportunities for local construction companies, including those which are not currently registered with Constructionline.

(AQW 4418/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Public procurement is subject to EU Treaty obligations, which require freedom of movement, transparency and non-discrimination on the basis of nationality. Public sector buyers therefore cannot restrict their purchases of goods, works or services to favour local firms.

Government recognises the important contribution that local construction companies make to the economy of Northern Ireland and in response to the economic downturn, my department established the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland (CIFNI) Procurement Task Group. Since the publication of the Task Group's report, Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and the other Centres of

Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) have been working with the Construction Industry Group for Northern Ireland (CIGNI) to develop a number of measures to standardise and streamline the pre-qualification process and thereby maximise opportunities for Small and Medium sized Enterprises.

The emerging proposals have been incorporated into a standard Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) template to be used to shortlist firms for invitation to tender. The PQQ:-

- includes proportionate minimum standards for experience and financial standing;
- accommodates applications from consortia;
- streamlines the assessment of health and safety competence; and
- removes the need for firms registered with Constructionline to submit financial information for each competition.

Constructionline is a register of contractors and consultants that have undergone a preliminary assessment for work in the public and private sectors. Greater use of Constructionline will reduce tendering costs and free up valuable resources that can be used to deliver best value for money projects.

Where a firm is not registered with Constructionline, it will be able to apply by submitting financial and other details with its PQQ. This information will be passed to Constructionline for assessment to the same standard.

It is anticipated that, subject to final agreement, the standard PQQ will be introduced for use by all CoPEs from 1 March 2010.

Rate Arrears

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what impact rate arrears will have on Executive spending plans in the current Comprehensive Spending Review period.

(AQW 4432/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: In line with the principles of Resource Accounting and Budgeting, from 2008-09, regional rates income has been budgeted for on an accruals basis.

This involves recognising costs and revenues as they are earned or incurred, irrespective of the period of receipt or payment. Therefore, there will be little, if any, impact from rate arrears over the Budget 2008-11 period.

Land Registry Service Staffing

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the total staffing costs of the Land Registry Service in each of the last five financial years.

(AQW 4482/10)

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 the staffing costs in connection with land registration for the last five financial years.

Financial Year	Staffing Costs
2004-2005	£4.490m
2005-2006	£5.258m
2006-2007	£5.378m

Financial Year	Staffing Costs
2007-2008	£6.364m
2008-2009	£4.352m

District Rates

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the average expected increase or decrease in district rates for (i) the Portaferry ward; (ii) the Ards district; and (iii) Northern Ireland as a whole.

(AQW 4507/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: District rates are set by each individual local council. Rates for the incoming financial year are normally struck by each council in February. It is not possible to know what the increase or decrease in district rates in the Ards area will be until that council sets its rate for the coming year.

The overall rate bill is made up of a regional and district rate. In 2008, the Executive agreed to freeze the domestic regional rate for the life of the CSR period. There will therefore be no increase in the domestic regional rate element in 2010/11.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Smoking Cessation Programmes and Products: Cost

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money was spent (i) in total; and (ii) by each Health and Social Care Trust, on (a) smoking cessation programmes; and (b) 'stop smoking' products issued free to the general public, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4125/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): Action to support smokers to quit is an important element of smoking reduction policy. Considerable investment has therefore been made in smoking cessation services across Northern Ireland.

A total of £3,131,283 has been spent on funding for smoking cessation services across Northern Ireland since 2004/05. Information on funding is not available by Health and Social Care Trust.

In addition, from 2006/07, £1,556,000 has been spent specifically for Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT), available free of charge to those who are eligible for free prescriptions. Spend on NRT is not available by Trust area.

It should be noted that any reduction in smoking related illnesses would greatly benefit the health service in terms of reduced overall costs for treating such illnesses. The latest available figures, which were for 2003/04, show that the estimated applicable total hospital costs here of treating cancer, circulatory and respiratory diseases, of which smoking has been a contributory factor, was £74m.

Procurement Process

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the concerns that have been raised in relation to value for money in the procurement process of his Department, what assurances can he give that the process will be operated in an objective manner which promotes value for money and transparency.

(AQW 4133/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department's approach to procurement has always been governed by Northern Ireland public sector procurement policy. Operating within that

framework and through Centres of Procurement Expertise, we will continue to secure value for money using fair and transparent procedures.

Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can confirm that his Department's guidance on the termination of pregnancy has been taken out of circulation and that all Health and Social Care Trusts have informed doctors of the High Court ruling regarding this guidance.
(AQW 4153/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following the decision of the High Court in the SPUC Judicial Review, I am currently considering my options. I will be making an announcement in due course.

Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is re-drafting its termination of pregnancy guidance in light of the Judicial Review in October 2009.
(AQW 4155/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following the decision of the High Court in the SPUC Judicial Review, I am currently considering my options. I will be making an announcement in due course.

Occupational Therapists' Referrals

Mr J Shannon asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she would consider applying a rule of construction to the timescales in which Occupational Therapists' referrals can be made on applications for disabled facilities grants.
(AQW 4157/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Occupational therapists' referrals in relation to Disabled Facilities Grant are subject to the existing Priorities for Action target of 13 weeks from referral to initial OT assessment.

Spinal or Neck Injuries

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why people who suffer spinal or neck injuries as a result of road traffic accidents in the Omagh area are taken to the Erne Hospital before being transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast
(AQW 4169/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland Ambulance Service crews, in line with current best practice, will take a cautionary approach to assessing patients with potential spinal or neck injuries following road traffic collisions. While some spinal injuries are clinically apparent at the scene, the majority are not. Given the potential risk of long term disability, should crews consider such an injury may have occurred, patients will be taken to the nearest appropriately equipped hospital so that the presence or absence of an injury may be confirmed. The requirement for onward transfer to specialist care is then assessed in light of the individual patient's clinical needs.

Dalriada Hospital: X-ray Scans

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many x-ray scans were carried out on patients whilst they were recuperating in Dalriada Hospital in (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; and (iii) 2009.
(AQW 4176/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of x-rays carried out on patients whilst they were recuperating in Dalriada Hospital in 2007, 2008 and 2009 is shown in the table below, broken down by CT Scan, and Plain Film X-ray.

Year	No. of x-ray scans carried out on patients whilst they were recuperating in Dalriada Hospital	
	CT Scans	Plain Film X-rays
2007	4	52
2008	2	59
2009	2	74

Source: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Dedicated Drugs Rehabilitation Centre

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration has been given to setting up a dedicated drugs rehabilitation centre.

(AQW 4190/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Overall regional commissioning and planning of substance misuse services, including access to specialist community based residential facilities, is now co-ordinated via the joint Health and Social Care Board (HSCB)/Public Health Agency (PHA), Bamford Mental Health and Disability Implementation Taskforce.

At present in each Trust area there is access to:

- comprehensive Addictions Treatment services within secondary care (including community and residential/in-patient services); and
- generic primary/secondary care services who will meet physical/mental health needs that may arise because of the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

During 2010/2011 the HSCB/PHA will appraise current levels of service provision, including access to specialist substance misuse treatment services.

Fraud Investigation Team

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3676/10, to detail (i) the cost of funding the fraud investigation team; and (ii) the total revenue recovered by this team, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4207/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the financial years 2005/06 – 2009/10, the operational costs of the Counter Fraud Investigation Service (CFIS) of the Business Services Organisation amounted to £2.4m. During the same period, total financial recoveries amounted to £3.29m. The latter excludes an on-going investigation, which has resulted in civil proceedings being instigated to recover some £0.15m.

The above figures do not include savings secured for Health and Social Care by the deterrent effect of the operations of CFIS; evidenced by the reduction of some 50% in the level of fraudulent claims for exemption from payment of statutory Health Service charges for prescriptions, dental and ophthalmic treatment.

Dalriada Hospital: Multiple Sclerosis Respite

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many beds there are currently for Multiple Sclerosis respite in Dalriada Hospital; and (ii) how many of these beds will be withdrawn this year, and on what date.

(AQW 4211/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 12 beds for Multiple Sclerosis respite in Dalriada Hospital; none of these 12 beds will be withdrawn within the 2009/10 year.

Dalriada Hospital

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what cuts to resources or services are being considered at Dalriada Hospital over the next 3 years.

(AQW 4212/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust currently has no plans to reduce services at Dalriada Hospital.

Nerve Stimulation

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3754/10, when the two patients awaiting nerve stimulation at the Royal Victoria Hospital will receive their treatment.

(AQW 4222/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At 13th January two patients were waiting for vagus nerve stimulation at the Royal Victoria Hospital. This waiting list will be cleared by the end of February 2010.

Consultants on Sick Leave

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many consultants in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are currently on sick leave; (ii) what arrangements the Trust has to cover their absence; and (iii) to provide a breakdown of the specialised care area and location of each absentee.

(AQW 4226/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department does not collect the data requested by specific grade of doctor, care area or location but by the medical and dental terms and conditions group.

Trust arrangements for covering absence of consultants varies according to each speciality and duration of absence. Measures include colleagues covering the emergency elements of the work or the recruitment of locums.

Information relating to sickness absence is published on a bi-annual basis the departmental website at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm.

Maternity and Gynaecology Provision

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if maternity and gynaecology provision will be transferred from the Mater Hospital to the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital.

(AQW 4227/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans to move gynaecology and maternity services from the Mater to the Royal Jubilee at this time.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how his budget is equality proofed; and how he is implementing Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act across his Department.
(AQW 4228/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Individual CSR bids made by the Department were subject to high level equality impact assessments. Trusts carried out screening on their subsequent efficiency proposals and carried out full Equality Impact Assessments where screening indicated this was required. HSC bodies and I, personally, have engaged with the Unions and many other Stakeholders in the course of the process.

Fundamentally, however, there is nothing equal about imposing a blunt 3% CSR efficiency plan on all Departments. No final unified equality impact assessment of the CSR efficiency approach was shown to the Executive before they made their decision. I am now in the position of having scant time to consider fully the impact of the additional £92m cut being imposed on my budget in 2010/11. I am concerned too, to ensure that the impact of the distribution of the total additional cuts for 2010/11 is assessed for each department, rather than only the very marginal difference between proposed cuts and 'pro-rata'.

My Department screens all its policies to identify those that may have a significant adverse impact on or consequence for people in any of the Section 75 groups. If, during the screening process, it is decided that a policy or decision has the potential for adverse impact, an Equality Impact Assessment is conducted.

Tyrone-Cavan Interconnector

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will conduct an investigation into the potential detrimental effects on health of the proposed Tyrone-Cavan Interconnector, given that a planning application has now been submitted.
(AQW 4229/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has no plans to commission any work associated with the planning application for the proposed Tyrone – Cavan Interconnector. I understand that the Environmental Statement that accompanies the planning application seeks to address relevant health issues and that the Public Health Agency and the Environmental Health Departments of a number of District Councils have been consulted.

Child Protection Register

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children are currently on the Child Protection Register within the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, broken down by area.
(AQW 4230/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available in the form requested.

Investing for Health Strategy

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the proposed new timescales for the the review of the Investing for Health Strategy that was scheduled for 2009.
(AQW 4249/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The review of Investing for Health commenced in July 2009. It is currently anticipated that the review will report by the end of April 2010.

Recommendations from the review will help inform a longer term programme of policy development.

Contact Youth

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding has been allocated for Contact Youth this financial year; and for the following year.

(AQW 4250/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the financial year 2009/10, £869992 has been allocated to Contact Youth.

Contact Youth provides a range of services which support implementation of a number of public health strategies including Investing for Health, suicide prevention, mental health promotion, and sexual violence prevention. Contact Youth also delivers the regional 24/7 "Lifeline" crisis response telephone helpline service.

Funding allocations for 2010/2011 have not yet been agreed, and future funding for the provision of the Lifeline service will be dependant on an extension of the contract for a further year.

Contact Youth

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have Contact Youth assisted through their lifeline system in each of the last two years.

(AQW 4251/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A total of 140,893 calls have been made to Lifeline since the service became operational at the end of January 2008. The service operators, Contact Youth, estimate that almost half of all callers use the helpline as a one-off or occasional repeat resource.

In addition to initial over the phone help, callers can, where appropriate, be referred for ongoing support. This is in the form of ongoing telephone or face-to-face counselling and/or specialised therapeutic support. By the end of December 2009, 8655 Lifeline clients had received additional support. Of these 8655, 4577 clients received counselling and support from mental health service professionals, and a further 4078 were referred to other Lifeline "wraparound" services, such as mentoring, befriending, and complementary therapies as follows:

April 2008 – March 2009 11,574 sessions provided to 1942 clients

April 2009 – December 2009 14,571 sessions provided to 2136 clients

Non-care Elements for Care Home Residents

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the estimated annual cost to the public purse of non-care elements for care home residents such as food and accommodation.

(AQW 4252/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Research undertaken by my Department has indicated that the cost of non-care elements in care homes can range between one half and two thirds of the total tariff. It is not, however, possible to determine the exact cost to the public purse of these elements as the total tariff for each placement is not constant and will vary depending on factors such as the assessed needs of the individual and the availability of appropriate placements. Furthermore, the cost to the public purse is reduced through each resident's individually assessed financial contribution towards the total tariff.

Review of Public Administration

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing posts have been lost in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust through the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 4257/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: None. The most recent Health and Social Care Workforce Census shows that the number of qualified Nursing and Midwifery staff in the Health and Social Care is 13,938 (whole time equivalents) and that this has remained unchanged since March 2008.

Executive Papers

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the subject matter of each of the 33 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 4266/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The detailed content of Executive papers including the agenda and minutes of the meeting are confidential.

Investing for Health Strategy

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Investing for Health strategy recognises the workplace as a priority setting for tackling health issues; and if the review of the strategy took account of the recommendations in the Boorman report, in particular that early intervention services should form part of the minimum service specification for Health Service staff.

(AQW 4276/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Investing for Health Strategy recognises the workplace as a key setting which has considerable potential for promoting health related issues in the workforce.

The high level review of the Investing for Health Strategy is currently underway and it is anticipated that the review will report by the end of April 2010. The Investing for Health Review is considering a range of high level strategic documents. The specific recommendations from the Boorman report will help inform a longer term programme of policy development with regard to workplace health.

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) which goods and services provided by his Department can be paid for online; (ii) the total number of transactions processed by his 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 4290/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department does not currently provide goods and services that can be paid for online.

Suicide Rate

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Programme for Government target of reducing the suicide rate by 15% by 2011 will be met.

(AQW 4298/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There was a very significant increase in recorded suicide rates in 2005 and 2006, with almost a doubling in the number of deaths since the start of the decade. The Northern Ireland suicide prevention strategy "Protect Life" was launched in 2006, in the midst of this unprecedented increase, with a 15% reduction target based partially on the much lower numbers of recorded suicides prior to 2005/06. The sharp rises in 2006 and 2006 had an almost immediate impact on the potential for achieving the 15% reduction target and it is now clear that this will not be achieved.

The Protect Life strategy is currently being reviewed and refreshed, and consideration is being given to the development of a wider range of performance indicators for assessing the impact of the strategy.

Programme for Government Targets

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department will meet the Programme for Government targets to (i) reduce the number of children in care; (ii) provide family support interventions; (iii) reduce the number of children on the child protection register; and (iv) increase the proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment by the time they reach 19 years of age.

(AQW 4299/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The target “To reduce the number of children in care by 12% by 2011” was withdrawn in agreement with the Executive on 1st October 2009 and a replacement target has been introduced – “From March 2010, for every child taken into care, a plan for permanence and associated timescale should be agreed (by Trusts) within six months”.
- (ii) HSC Board figures show that regionally, there were 2,505 family support interventions at December 09 against target of 2000 for the 2009/10 year;*
- (iii) The March 2008 baseline figure showed that 416 looked after children were on the child protection register. The targeted reduction is to be achieved by March 2011. The HSC Board and Trusts are currently developing new regional guidance for child protection of looked after children which is expected to be in place by April 2010.
- (iv) The latest information provided by the HSC Board indicates that, at October 2009, 64% of care leavers were either in education, training or employment working towards a target of 70% by March 2010.*

Day Care Services

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the per capita spend on (i) day care services for people with a learning disability; and (ii) all other services for people with a learning disability in each Health and Social Care Trust area, broken down by capital and current streams.

(AQW 4312/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below sets out the 2008/2009 expenditure per capita by Health and Social Care Trusts for day care services for people with a learning disability and all other services for people with a learning disability. This has been broken down by revenue and capital expenditure.

Programme of Care Learning Disability 2008/09	Belfast	Southern	South Eastern	Western	Northern
Day Care Services per capita spend	£33.41	£26.64	£17.79	£27.42	£24.27
Other Services per capita spend	£160.31	£103.32	£77.52	£79.63	£64.47
Capital Cost per capita spend*	£13.85	£2.15	£4.53	£0.94	nil

* Capital spend varies significantly year to year by Trust

Note: The Belfast trust per capita spend for other services includes Muckamore Abbey hospital which provides services to other trust areas.

Adults With a Learning Disability

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many adults with a learning disability currently reside within the Western Health and Social Care Trust area; and (ii) how many of these clients have been provided with a care plan.

(AQW 4313/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information provided by the Western Health and Social Care Trust indicated that as at 29th January 2010:

- (i) 1,639 adults were on an informal register as having been referred to the Trust for assessment and met the criteria for a formal diagnosis of learning disability. However, there may be others in the Trust that have never been referred or presented for formal assessment.
- (ii) Approximately 1,200 adults with a learning disability, currently residing in the Trust, have been provided with a care plan.

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an estimate of the percentage of his annual budget which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.

(AQW 4323/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Preventative and early intervention measures are part of the work of all Health and Social Care practitioners from GPs to Family and Childcare Social Workers. As such, it is not possible to clarify the total investment as requested. These measures will form part of the normal response to injury or illness, or risk of neglect or abuse, as practitioners seek to prevent a recurrence of illness and injury, or risk of neglect or abuse.

Neuro-physiotherapy Services

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what arrangements are in place to allow patients diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, who have impaired mobility and have difficulty travelling to appointments, to access neuro-physiotherapy services.

(AQW 4337/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Local initiatives, such as Rural Lift transport, Door to Door transport, and volunteer drivers are available, while the Multiple Sclerosis Society may also provide transport to neuro-physiotherapy services. General Practitioners may arrange for ambulance transport, if appropriate, or, on occasions, travel by taxi may be authorised. In addition, for those patients who are unable to travel, physiotherapy services may be provided in a domiciliary or day care setting.

Neuro-physiotherapists

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many neuro-physiotherapists currently operate in (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) in each Health and Social Care Trust; and how these figures compare to the rest of the UK.

(AQW 4338/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The requested information in relation to Northern Ireland is provided in the table below. Figures for neurophysiotherapists in the other UK countries are not readily available.

PHYSIOTHERAPISTS WITH NEURO-DISABILITY SKILLS IN HSC TRUSTS.

HSC Trust	Headcount	WTE1
Belfast	29	23.28
Northern	2	2

HSC Trust	Headcount	WTE1
South Eastern	12	9.4
Southern	14	10.4
Western	12	10.22

Source: Health & Social Care Trusts

Note: WTE= whole-time equivalent

Neuro-physiotherapists

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many neuro-physiotherapists have been in post in each of the last five years; and if he has any plans to increase the number currently employed.

(AQW 4339/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The requested information is provided in the table below.

PHYSIOTHERAPISTS WITH NEURO-DISABILITY SKILLS IN THE HSC TRUSTS

HSCT	2005	WTE	2006	WTE	2007	WTE	2008	WTE	2009	WTE
Belfast	21	17	21	17	21	17	29	23.28	29	23.28
Southern	-	-	12	9.4	12	9.4	12	9.4	14	10.4
South Eastern	9	6.4	9	6.4	10	7.4	10	7.4	12	9.4
Northern †									9	8
Western	8.5	6.72	10.5	8.72	10.5	8.72	11.5	9.72	12	10.22

Source: Health and Social Care Trust

† Information is not readily available.

It is the responsibility of Health and Social Care employers to determine the complement of staff necessary to provide service.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Management and Service Structure

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current (i) management structure; and (ii) service structure, in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 4349/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 3906/10.

Health and Social Care Trusts and the Regional Health Board

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the Health and Social Care Trusts and the Regional Health Board work together.

(AQW 4350/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) works with the Public Health Agency (PHA) to assess the health and social care needs of the people of Northern and to reflect them in an annual commissioning plan, which is agreed by both organisations before being approved by my Department.

Health and Social Care Trusts must provide services in response to the commissioning plan, in accordance with the standards and targets set by me.

Working with the PHA, the HSCB is responsible for managing and monitoring the achievement of agreed objectives and targets by Trusts as set out in SBAs. At the same time, the HSCB and PHA also work together closely in supporting Trusts to improve performance and achieve the desired outcomes.

Clinical Obesity

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made to address the needs of people who are considered clinically obese and 'at risk'.

(AQW 4356/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Later this year, an Obesity Prevention Strategic Framework aimed at tackling the rising prevalence of obesity in Northern Ireland will be published.

The majority of care and advice to patients who are clinically obese will be provided through their GP including treatment of any specific clinical condition.

Staffing for Heart Surgery Procedures

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to address the shortage of staffing for heart surgery procedures.

(AQW 4372/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Regional Cardiac Network is currently developing plans to increase local cardiac surgery capacity to make Northern Ireland self-sufficient in the provision of cardiac surgery by 2012/2013. These plans include the equipping of a fourth theatre at the Royal, provision of additional ICU capacity, and recruiting staff, subject to funding. Recruitment is ongoing at the Royal for two Consultant Cardiothoracic Anaesthetists, a Consultant Paediatric Cardiologist, and a Consultant Cardiac Surgeon with primary responsibility for Paediatric and Adult Congenital Heart Disease.

Mephedrone

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department is taking to ensure that mephedrone and other so-called 'legal highs' are banned.

(AQW 4373/10)

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.

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.

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 2010.

Liam Adams: Allegations of Child Sex Abuse Against

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Gerry Adams MLA raised any concerns with Social Services regarding the appointment of Liam Adams at the Clonard Youth Centre; and, if his Department has had any discussions with statutory agencies concerning the child healthcare implications of allegations of child sex abuse against Liam Adams.

(AQW 4600/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It would be inappropriate for me to comment on an individual case.

Hospital-acquired Infections

Rev Dr R Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the reduction in MRSA and C-difficile cases in the last six months was achieved.

(AQO 713/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the past 18 months MRSA cases have been reduced by a third and C. difficile cases are down by over 40%.

I made it one of my priorities from the outset to tackle healthcare-associated infections. That is why in September 2007 I set targets for reducing C. difficile and MRSA.

In January 2008 I announced a series of focused, practical interventions supported by new money. These included measures to improve environmental cleanliness; the unannounced hygiene inspections; restrictions on visiting; a regional dress code for healthcare staff, and resources to improve antibiotic prescribing.

In addition to these measures I commissioned an independent review of the C. diff outbreak in Northern Trust hospitals. The RQIA made 53 recommendations, which I accepted. The implementation of these recommendations has contributed to the ongoing reductions in infections.

DHSSPS Budget

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an overview of his Department's three year budget settlement.

(AQO 714/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I always said my budget was only as good as it gets but that in truth it wasn't enough to deliver the services we need here in Northern Ireland. I stand by that view.

My Department faces its lowest uplift in recent times. Over the three years to March 2011, my Department will receive an uplift of just 1.7% in real terms. This compares to average real terms English uplifts of 3.4%. In addition, the Executive agreed that my Department must secure CSR savings of 3% per annum which amount to £700m over the CSR period.

John Appleby's report on relative funding for N Ireland concluded that DHSSPS needed a real terms increase of 4.3% per annum – equivalent to over £400m of additional resources - although even this would be insufficient to close the gap with England. Is what I have enough, no, of course its not. Could I do more if funds were available? Emphatically yes.

Public Health Agency

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the remit of the Public Health Agency's Directorate of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals.

(AQO 719/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Public Health Agency was established on 1 April 2009 as part of the Review of Public Administration. Within the Agency the Directorate of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals provides professional support and advice on public health, commissioning of services, quality, safety and patient experience, primary care, personal, public involvement and midwifery supervision.

The Directorate while based in the Public Health Agency, provides services to support the Health and Social Care Board in the discharge of its functions. The Director of Nursing is a member of the Agency and HSC Boards.

DHSSPS Advertising

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on advertising since March 2007, including the spend on consultants and distribution.

(AQO 720/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since March 2007, my Department has spent a total of £1,531,088 directly on advertising. This includes both campaign and classified advertising. It includes all costs relating to the advertising campaign. The Department does not use consultants when developing advertising campaigns.

The Department uses advertising campaigns as an effective intervention to inform or change behaviour.

For example advertising was used to convey important public health messages about swine flu and the HPV vaccine for teenage girls which can prevent cervical cancer. 'Paid for advertising' was also used to raise awareness about domestic and sexual violence. These campaigns have used a range of media such as TV, radio, posters and leaflets to get across essential health messages.

Adverts are also placed in newspapers to advertise job vacancies.

Erne Hospital

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure the future funding and stability of the Medical and Surgical Assessment Unit at the Erne Hospital.

(AQO 721/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Medical and Surgical Assessment Unit was established in June 2009 as part of the Western Trust's new Emergency Care Pathway for acute medical and surgical patients following the transfer of acute services from the Tyrone County Hospital. The unit receives all medical and surgical patients referred by GPs to the Erne Hospital where they are assessed to determine whether they need to be admitted to hospital.

The unit is currently funded from within the Trust's existing budgets and I am advised that this service is sustainable.

Swine Flu

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much has been spent on swine flu to date; and how many deaths have occurred as a result of swine flu compared to the number that were anticipated.

(AQO 722/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Speaker, as highlighted in the February Monitoring Round, Swine Flu has cost my Department £44m. Almost half of this cost is the result of nationally driven initiatives.

An additional £1.5m has been retained to meet any Swine Flu pressures that may still occur. In line with agreements made with DFP, £19m has been returned for redistribution to other Departments - £3m in December and £16m in February.

Regarding the second aspect of your question, planning assumptions, based on a reasonable worst-case scenario, were issued on 3rd September and estimated that up to 20,000 deaths were possible in the UK. This was refined in the most recent planning guidance issued on 22nd October to reflect emerging evidence and it was then estimated up to 1000 deaths in the UK were possible during the second wave. 392 deaths have occurred in the UK to date. 18 of these have occurred in Northern Ireland.

Child Abuse and Neglect

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will produce his assessment of the extent of child abuse and neglect in Northern Ireland, as sought in the Ryan report motion on institutional child abuse agreed by the Assembly on 2 November 2009.

(AQO 723/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials are finalising a discussion paper for consideration by the Northern Ireland Executive outlining a range of options which will help to inform the way ahead in relation to historical child abuse within Northern Ireland. I hope to table this paper within the next number of weeks.

Any decision in relation to historical child abuse will be a matter for the Executive as a whole.

Maternity Services

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact on mothers and babies as a result of being discharged from hospital within six hours of giving birth.

(AQO 724/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The safety of mothers and babies is a fundamental priority for the Health Service and any decision to allow women home early will be based on clinical decisions by those responsible for their care.

If a woman is not ready for discharge then she will obviously remain in hospital until she is ready.

Post natal care will occur in both the hospital and the community. That care will transfer to the community when the woman is discharged to the community mid-wife.

Department for Regional Development

Potholes

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to repair and resurface potholes following the recent cold spell.

(AQW 4205/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has established Maintenance Standards for Safety, and an inspection programme, to help ensure that the North's roads are in a serviceable condition. Surface defects, which are reported to Roads Service, outside of the inspection programme are covered according to the Standards, and remedial work carried out as necessary.

Since the beginning of January 2010, an additional £15 million, approximately, has been allocated to my Department's Roads Service Divisions. This money will be used to progress Road Service's pre-determined programmes of work, that target the worst roads across the North, and also to deal with the affects of the recent cold spell.

Road Repairs

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will set aside extra money for road repairs following the recent cold spell.

(AQW 4216/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Since the beginning of January 2010, an additional £15 million, approximately, has been allocated to my Department's Roads Service Divisions. This money will be used to progress Road Service's pre-determined programmes of work, that target the worst roads across the North, and also to deal with the affects of the recent cold spell.

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) which goods and services provided by his Department can be paid for online; (ii) the total number of transactions processed by his 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 4245/10)

Minister for Regional Development: In my Department, Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) and Strangford Ferry tickets can be paid for online. Details on the numbers of PCNs and on the number of Strangford Ferry tickets are contained in Tables A and B.

TABLE A

Date	Payment Method						
	Auto-phone	On-line	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other	Total
13.11.2006 - 31.12.2006	4,113	2,152	5,698	1,211	93	-	13,267
01.01.2007 - 31.12.2007	41,800	22,645	53,029	11,191	904	-	129,569
01.01.2008 - 31.12.2008	40,745	25,386	43,370	8,421	723	420	119,065
01.01.2009 - 31.12.2009	39,036	26,331	34,996	7,717	586	1,000	109,666
01.01.2010 - 31.01.2010	2,399	1,720	1,914	404	24	95	6,556
	128,093	78,234	139,007	28,944	2,330	1,515	378,123
Percentage Total	33.88%	20.69%	36.76%	7.65%	0.62%	0.40%	

TABLE B

Date	Payment Method						
	Auto-phone	On-line	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other	Total
2005		37	-	-	-	5,581	5,618

Date	Payment Method						
	Auto-phone	On-line	Cheque	Postal Order	Cash	Other	Total
2006		117	1,301	-	922	3,313	5,653
2007		166	1,981	-	1,301	1,611	5,059
2008		96	2,371	-	1,600	1,812	5,879
2009		4	1,838	-	1,426	1,461	4,729
		420	7,491	-	5,249	13,778	26,938
Percentage Total		1.56%	27.81%	0%	19.49%	51.15%	

Responsibility for enforcing on street parking restrictions transferred from the PSNI to the Department in October 2006. PCN transactions listed in Table A are taken from November 2006 to date.

A detailed analysis of 2005 data in Table B is not available.

Damage to Roads

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to estimate the overall cost of the damage to roads during the recent cold spell.

(AQW 4259/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a repeated freezing and thawing cycle, as we have recently experienced, has a damaging effect on the road network, by causing the carriageway to split and potholes to form. It will be some time before the full extent of the damage caused across the road network, due to the recent cold spell, can be fully assessed and, therefore, the cost of repairing the subsequent potholes formed is not available.

However, I can confirm that since the beginning of January 2010, an additional £15 million approximately, has been allocated to Roads Service's Divisions. This money will be used to progress pre-determined programmes of work, targeting the worst roads, and also to deal with the effects of the recent cold spell.

Roads Service will continue to undertake regular inspections and condition surveys, to ensure that the road network does not fall below satisfactory and serviceable levels.

Potholes and Road Erosion

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to repair potholes and road erosion due to the recent cold spell.

(AQW 4260/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department's Roads Service to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. In recognition of this duty of care, Roads Service has put in place Maintenance Standards for Safety, and an inspection programme to ensure that roads are in a serviceable condition. These standards, which are designed to ensure a consistent service level and a safe highway, while offering value for money, are based on best practice, research and consultation with the public and other professional bodies and Industry.

Essentially, the safety standards and procedures currently in operation, establish frequencies for road inspections dependent on traffic volumes, and specify response times for the repair of defects. Inspection frequencies vary between daily cycles for motorways, to four monthly cycles for carriageways carrying low volumes of traffic.

Response times specified for the repair of defects are dependent on the severity of the defect and range from one calendar day, to inclusion in the next work programme. These systems and procedures are recognised and accepted by the courts as being robust, given the finite level of funding available. The Standards were last reviewed in 2006, and they continue to provide a systematic approach to road maintenance management.

Surface defects which are identified outside of these inspection regimes, for example, those reported by members of the public, or as the result of ad-hoc inspections, are also dealt with according to the above standards and remedial work arranged as necessary.

In addition, I can confirm that since the beginning of January, an additional £15 million approximately, has been allocated to Roads Service Divisions. This money will be used to progress pre-determined programmes of work, targeting the worst roads, and also to deal with the effects of the recent cold spell.

CAF Trains

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many CAF trains are currently in service by NI Railways; and (ii) how many of these are in use on the Derry to Belfast line.

(AQW 4307/10)

Minister for Regional Development: NI Railways has 23 CAF Class 3000 trains at its disposal. Normally 20-21 train units would be in service each day, the remaining trains undergoing overhaul, maintenance or examination.

Translink has informed me that during peak morning and evening operations 5 trains are required to operate Derry line services. These are normally CAF rolling stock. The number of trains in use on the Derry to Belfast line can rise to 6 if one of the 5 trains is operating as a 6-car unit.

Road Salt

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the road salt reserve for January to March 2010.

(AQW 4333/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Departments Roads Service has advised that, as of 29 January 2010, it was holding approximately 18000 tonnes of salt.

Roads Service has a contract with Salt Sales in Carrickfergus for the supply of salt, and is currently replenishing its stocks at a rate of approximately 1000 tonnes each day.

Road Salt

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the volume; and (ii) the cost of road salt spread in North Antrim in each of the last three years, and this year until 10 January 2010.

(AQW 4334/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it holds information on a Divisional basis but not by Parliamentary Constituency. The North Antrim Constituency area lies within Roads Service's Northern Division and details of the volume of road salt spread in Northern Division, in each of the last three financial years are provided in the table below:

Winter Service year	Volume of Salt Spread Northern Division (tonnes)
2006/07	13423
2007/08	15834
2008/09	26086

Winter Service year	Volume of Salt Spread Northern Division (tonnes)
2009/2010 (up to and including 10 January 2010)	17632

Roads Service purchases road salt by tender, therefore details of the purchase price is commercially sensitive and not be in the interest of securing best value for money to release.

Road Salt

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the volume; and (ii) the cost of road salt purchased by his Department in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4335/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Details of the volume of roads salt purchased in each of the last 3 financial years by my Department's Roads Service are provided in the table below:-

Winter Service year	Volume of Salt Spread (tonnes)
2006/07	41,694 tonnes
2007/08	41,973 tonnes
2008/09	88,250 tonnes

The purchase of road salt by Roads Service is subject to tender and I am not able to disclose the cost of purchase for reasons of commercial sensitivity and in the interests of securing best value for money.

Contingency Plan Anticipating the Recent Severe Cold Weather

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he approved a contingency plan anticipating the recent severe cold weather, and if so, what actions in this plan related to North Antrim.
(AQW 4336/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure that it is in a state of readiness for the winter service season. As well as undertaking a number of routine pre-season checks, Roads Service reviews its plans to ensure that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, salt supplies are adequate and that winter service equipment is in working order. Salt bins and piles are also replenished prior to the start of the winter season.

While it was not possible to anticipate the onset of the coldest December since 1981, Roads Service's winter service objectives were achieved during this prolonged cold period. In addition, secondary salting was carried out where there were exceptional difficulties. In the North Antrim area, as in all other areas, this was prioritised after completion of primary salting commitments, and when resources allowed. Secondary salting included facilitating access for Emergency Services, for medical staff and carers attending the sick and elderly and for the transport of the disabled. It also was also directed at routes to schools at risk of closure due to road conditions and to farms to facilitate the collection of milk and the delivery of food stuffs, and other important additional needs of the community, as requested by elected representatives and the public. Additional grit piles were also provided for use on a self help basis.

Salt boxes were regularly replenished, but it is acknowledged that the extreme weather conditions led to an unprecedented demand for salt. Furthermore, there was an additional pressure exerted on this resource by salt frequently being removed from boxes for use in other areas, outside of the public road network.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether NI Water's embedded contract personnel are employees of NI Water as a result of the mutuality of obligation that exists between them.
(AQW 4352/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it does not recognise the term 'embedded contract personnel'. However, employees of contractors engaged by NIW under a tendered contract arrangement are not deemed to be NIW employees.

Tender Documents CO 71 and CO 58

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether NI Water is in the process of re-wording or re-constituting previous contract services tender documents CO 71 and CO 58.
(AQW 4353/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that contracts C071 and C058 are being reviewed to ensure that they meet the company's service requirements in the most efficient and cost effective way.

Within the next six months, NIW expects to re-tender C071 for the provision of temporary technical support. Contract C058, which will terminate in April 2010, has been reviewed and the scope of services redefined and incorporated within a larger strategic contract C387 relating to electrical installation and repair. The tender process for C387 is currently underway and NIW hopes to award new contracts in April 2010.

Tender Documents CO 71 and CO 58

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development if the re-wording or re-constituting of previous contract services tender documents CO 71 and CO 58 will protect the rights of embedded contract personnel.
(AQW 4354/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it does not recognise the term 'embedded contract personnel'. Contracts CO 71 and CO 58 are being reviewed to ensure they meet the company's service requirements in the most efficient and cost effective way. However, employees of contractors engaged by NIW under a tendered contract arrangement are not deemed to be NIW employees and responsibility for ensuring that their rights are protected lies with the contractor.

Potholes

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost to Roads Service of repairing potholes in January 2010, caused during the recent cold spell.
(AQW 4355/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a repeated freezing and thawing cycle, as we have recently experienced, has a damaging effect on the road network, by causing the carriageway to split and potholes to form. It will be some time before the full extent of the damage caused across the road network, due to the recent cold spell, can be fully assessed and therefore, the cost of repairing the subsequent potholes formed is not available.

However, I can confirm that since the beginning of January 2010, an additional £15 million approximately has been allocated to Roads Service's Divisions. This money will be used to progress pre-determined programmes of work, targeting the worst roads and also to deal with the effects of the recent cold spell.

Roads Service will continue to undertake regular inspections and condition surveys to ensure that the road network does not fall below satisfactory and serviceable levels.

Portrush to Coleraine Rail Service

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many times the Portrush to Coleraine train has been out of service in the last year; (ii) why this has occurred; and (iii) what steps he has taken to address the problem.

(AQW 4364/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have informed me that approximately 13,300 services are scheduled to operate on the Portrush line in the course of one year. The following table shows that the Portrush train was out of service 292 times between 29th January 2009 and 28th January 2010. However, only 119 of these cancellations are considered to be within the control of Translink. This gives a reliability figure of 99.1% for the Portrush line for this period against a passenger charter target of 99.2%.

PORTRUSH LINE ANALYSIS 29/01/2009 – 28/01/2010

Total Number of Cancellations - 20		Total Number of Bus Substitutions – 272	
Number	Cause	Number	Cause
1	Fatality	116	Fatality
7	Vandalism	2	Customer
3	Signalling & Electrical power failure	9	Signalling & Electrical power failure
3	Mechanical failures	63	Mechanical failures
4	Severe Weather	43	Severe Weather
2	Staff failure to report	16	Staff failure to report
		23	Operational incident

Translink point out that it is worth highlighting the following issues arising from this table:

- A fatality on 30th January 2009 resulted in 1 cancellation and 116 bus substitutions.
- Severe weather in December 2009 and January 2010 resulted in the freezing of train and track operating systems resulting in 4 cancellations and 43 bus substitutions.
- NIE power failures impacted upon 12 services (3 cancellations and 9 bus substitutions).
- Mechanical issues with the 450 class set on the Portrush branch has caused 3 cancellations and 63 bus substitutions.

With any failure of the train set on the Portrush branch an engineer or replacement train is required to be sent from Belfast. This ultimately results in service disruption and for a bus substitution to be implemented.

Any failure of the Class 3000 units in the Coleraine/Londonderry area also requires the set to be removed from the Portrush branch and operated in place of the failed unit. Covering the Portrush branch with a bus substitution is considered the most effective means of minimising the disruption to services on the Derry line.

The Class 450 trains operate to an agreed maintenance schedule, however because of the age of these trains faults will inevitably occur.

Finally power failures require intervention from signalling technicians who may not be in the immediate area to quickly reset the system.

As far as steps to mitigate such occurrences are concerned, NI Railways makes every effort to operate all train services as timetabled. All cancellations and bus substitutions are investigated and cause attributed accordingly.

Derry to Belfast Rail Service

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken to address the over-crowding on the Derry to Belfast rail service.

(AQW 4365/10)

Minister for Regional Development: In common with most interurban/commuter railways NI Railways experiences a degree of standing passengers on peak morning and evening services, however levels of standing remain generally in line with the Passenger's Charter commitment and NI Railways would not consider these trains to be overcrowded.

Taking the Derry line specifically, Translink have indicated that levels of standing on Derry line trains were reported as generally in line with the Passenger's Charter commitment. Currently loadings are similar to the same time last year. Two Monday-Friday morning trains are busy i.e. the 0656 and 0726 ex Coleraine to Belfast where passengers frequently stand from Antrim to Belfast Central, a journey of some 25 minutes.

On Friday afternoons two trains are particularly busy during term time i.e. the 1420 and 1610 services to Derry, with the 1610 train having been recorded with up to 300 passengers (200 seated and 100 standing). These numbers are generated by weekly students travelling home in addition to commuters and will frequently result in standing as far as Ballymena.

However Translink are of the view that the above remains in line with Passenger's Charter commitments because all available trains are deployed during those periods.

NI Railways continues to monitor train loadings on a regular basis across all lines and endeavours to deploy larger trains when additional trains are available, particularly on the services where passenger loadings are highest. On occasions, usually in response to special events, the normal 3-carriage trains on the Derry line are increased to 6-carriage trains to meet passenger demand. Again, this very much depends on train set availability. However most events are at weekends when peak vehicle requirement is lower than during the week and therefore additional trains are readily available.

In the medium-term Translink anticipate continuing increase in ridership on the Derry route. Following the arrival of new trains in 2011/12, planned track re-lay and re-signalling between Coleraine and Derry in 2013/14, NI Railways will be in a position to further increase frequency of service provision on this line and thus enhance capacity (seats available per hour), in addition to increasing train size on key selected services.

Skipperstone Road, Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans the Roads Service has to resurface the Skipperstone Road, Bangor.

(AQW 4370/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that at present, there are no plans to carry out resurfacing work on the Skipperstone Road, Bangor. However, Roads Service will continue to inspect this road and repair any defects identified, in accordance with its maintenance guidelines.

Salt Box: Cost of Providing

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what the cost of providing a salt box is.

(AQW 4375/10)

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.

Northern Ireland Railways

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the annual figure for (i) capital investment; and (ii) public service obligation payments to NI Railways in each year from 2000 to 2009. **(AQW 4377/10)**

Minister for Regional Development: The annual figures for (i) capital investment; and (ii) public service obligation payments to NI Railways in each year from 2000 to 2009 are set out in the attached table.

ANNUAL PUBLIC SERVICE OBLIGATION SUPPORT AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT TO NI RAILWAYS 2000/01 – 2008/09

Year	PSO	Capital	Total
2000/01	12.5	10.9	23.4
2001/02	16.4	32.7	49.1
2002/03	17.7	44.3	62.0
2003/04	19.2	20.5	39.7
2004/05	20.9	46.5	67.4
2005/06	21.3	36.1	57.4
2006/07	21.7	10.6	32.3
2007/08	24.1	27.4	51.5
2008/09	23.0	36.1	59.1

Note that the figures supplied reconcile to the Regional Development departmental accounts and may differ marginally from the figures recognised in the NI Railways accounts.

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the percentage of his annual budget which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures. **(AQW 4386/10)**

Minister for Regional Development: Where appropriate, action is taken to identify and cost preventative and early intervention measures on a range of roads, water and transport infrastructure. But in the way our budgets and programmes are constructed it is not possible to single out the costs involved.

Capital Spend Schemes

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department carried out risk assessments on all capital spend schemes in each of the last five years, and if not, why not. **(AQW 4407/10)**

Minister for Regional Development: Effective risk management has been a required part of capital projects undertaken by the Department and its arm's length bodies in the last five years. The management of risk is undertaken as part of the project management arrangements.

Water Meters in Commercial Properties

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what is NI Water's target for installing water meters in commercial properties. **(AQW 4429/10)**

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it aims to install meters on all commercial properties as it is the preferred method of levying charges on non-domestic properties. However, there are circumstances where it may not be possible to fit a meter such as shared supplies, engineering difficulties and obstructions. NIW estimates that it will install an additional 5,600 water meters on existing and new commercial properties over the next three years.

Removal of Boulders and Fences at St Columba's Vale, Newtownards

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development why his Department's office at Jubilee Road, Newtownards has not responded to phone calls and written queries, over a three month period, regarding the removal of boulders and fences at Columbas Vale, Newtownards.

(AQW 4448/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I am advised by my Department's Roads Service that, whilst they have not provided a substantive reply in this matter, they have indicated in a brief telephone conversation with your office that this was a particularly complex matter which was likely to take some time to resolve. The indications are that legal proceedings will be required and with a number of specific procedural steps to be followed these can be time consuming.

During the last few months, Roads Service staff have dealt with unprecedented weather conditions in the form of flooding and snow/ice issues. I am sure you will appreciate the necessity for staff to prioritise and address the most urgent matters. I understand that this is a matter relating to a neighbourhood dispute and is regarded as less urgent when compared to other competing priorities.

I do offer my apologies that your earlier letter to the local Section Office has not been responded to, and I have asked the local Section Engineer, Mr Stanley Lamb, to write directly to you to update you on this matter.

Buses Involved in Accidents

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to detail the number of buses involved in accidents directly attributable to the cold weather since the start of December 2009; and (ii) the number of these incidents which involved school buses.

(AQW 4473/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that from 1 December 2009 to 1 February 2010 there were 21 accidents attributed to the cold weather, of which four were recorded as involving school buses.

Flooding at 21 Ballyblack Road, Newtownards

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4378/10, as there has been sufficient suitable weather conditions since the last site meeting in August 2009 to permit NI Water to carry out the work at 21, Ballyblack Road, Newtownards, to give an assurance and timescale for completion of the repairs.

(AQW 4543/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that its contractor will complete the work at 21 Ballyblack Road, Newtownards by 23 February 2010.

Road Repairs

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his strategy for road repairs following the recent cold spell.

(AQO 726/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a repeated freezing and thawing cycle, as we have recently experienced, has a damaging effect on the road

network, by causing the carriageway to split and potholes to form. It will be some time before the full extent of the damage across the road network can be fully assessed.

Article 8 of the Roads Order 1993, places a duty on Roads Service to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. In recognition of its duty of care, Roads Service has put in place a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety and an inspection programme, to ensure that roads are in a serviceable condition.

These Standards, which are designed to ensure a consistent service level and a safe highway, while offering value for money, are based on best practice, research and consultation with both the public, and other professional bodies and Industry.

Essentially, the Safety Standards and procedures currently in operation establish frequencies for road inspections, dependent on traffic volumes and specify response times for the repair of defects. Inspection frequencies vary between daily cycles for motorways, to four monthly cycles for carriageways carrying low volumes of traffic.

Response times specified for the repair of defects are dependent on the severity of the defect and range from one calendar day, to simple inclusion in the next work programme for that particular route. These systems and procedures are recognised and accepted by the courts as being robust, given the finite level of funding available. The Standards were last reviewed in 2006, and they continue to provide a systematic approach to road maintenance management.

Surface defects which are identified outside of these inspection regimes, for example, those reported by members of the public, or as the result of ad-hoc inspections, will be dealt with according to the standards I've mentioned, and remedial work arranged as necessary.

In addition, I can confirm that since the beginning of January, an additional £15 million approximately, has been allocated to Roads Service's Divisions. This money will be used to progress pre-determined programmes of work, targeting the worst roads, and also to deal with the effects of the recent cold spell.

A26 Ballymoney to Coleraine

Mr G Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development what the average daily volume of traffic has been on the A26 between Ballymoney and Coleraine in each of the last three years.

(AQO 730/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the average daily volume of traffic on the A26, between Ballymoney and Coleraine, in each of the last three years was as follows:-

Year	Vehicles
2007	14777
2008	16435
2009	12465

Name Plaques on Bridges

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his policy in relation to the erection of name plaques on bridges; and how many plaques have been erected in the last five years.

(AQO 731/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department, while being the bridge naming authority, has no policy for the erection of name plaques on bridges.

Unfortunately, my Department's Roads Service does not hold the information you request. However, I can confirm that Roads Service has, on occasion, replaced some existing name plaques when carrying out maintenance or strengthening works on bridges.

Road Repairs

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister for Regional Development what priority is given to the repairing of potholes on roads.

(AQO 733/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a repeated freezing and thawing cycle, as we have recently experienced, has a damaging effect on the road network, by causing the carriageway to split and potholes to form. It will be some time before the full extent of the damage across the road network can be fully assessed.

Article 8 of the Roads Order 1993, places a duty on Roads Service to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. In recognition of its duty of care, Roads Service has put in place a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety and an inspection programme, to ensure that roads are in a serviceable condition.

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Department for Social Development

People Sleeping Rough

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for an estimate of the number of people sleeping rough in (a) Belfast; (b) Londonderry; and (c) other towns in Northern Ireland; (ii) what services her Department has in place to help these people; and (iii) what targets exist to reduce or eliminate rough sleeping.

(AQW 4136/10)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie):

- (i) An estimate of the numbers of people sleeping rough in (a) Belfast, (b) Londonderry/ Derry and (c) other towns in Northern Ireland during a snap shot of December 2009 is as follows:

- (a) **Belfast:** Homelessness outreach services provided by the Welcome Centre in association with the Salvation Army engaged with 118 individuals during December 2009. A considerable number of these have a propensity for sleeping rough but on average only around five would sleep rough on a nightly basis.
- (b) **Derry/Londonderry:** First Housing Aid and Support Services (FHASS) provide a night time outreach service in Derry City. The activity of the night support service ensured that there were no individuals sleeping rough in the Derry city centre area during December 2009.
- (c) **Other towns in Northern Ireland:** There is little evidence of anybody persistently sleeping rough elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Street drinking services such as the Link Project in Newtownards exist in a number of locations which signpost potential rough sleepers to direct access hostels where appropriate. There have also been isolated cases of persons rough sleeping such as a small group of Polish nationals near Newry during December.
- (ii) The Welcome Centre provides a 24 Hour Outreach service to rough sleepers in Belfast. In addition they provide a Drop-In Centre which provides social, catering and showering facilities. In the evenings they collect and escort individuals to either the Crash Facility at the Salvation Army hostel at Centenary House, to other hostels in the city or to private addresses.
- A Rough Sleepers/Street Drinkers strategy for Derry has ensured the availability of crisis accommodation and night support services delivered by First Housing Aid and Support Services (FHASS). Individuals are collected and escorted to a range of voluntary sector hostels in the city.
- Elsewhere in Northern Ireland direct access hostels provide sufficient places for potential rough sleepers.
- (iii) There are no actual targets to reduce or eliminate rough sleeping but the services that are provided exist to eliminate the need for people to sleep rough. These services that have led to an overall reduction in the numbers of rough sleepers are all preventative measures arising initially from the 2002 Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Homelessness Strategy which led to the Rough Sleeper Strategy established in Belfast in 2004 and are funded by the NIHE in partnership with the voluntary sector. The Derry Rough Sleeper strategy was established in 2009 and a phased implementation plan has been introduced to establish a continuum of services for this client group.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development the average cost of the administrative processing of a disabled facilities grant (i) west of the Bann; and (ii) east of the Bann; and to explain the reasons for any discrepancy.

(AQW 4156/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested and cannot be broken down by grant type. The Housing Executive measures Grants Offices' performance taking into account all activity over the previous 12 months against the cost to run the office and expressing the result as a processing rate. The average processing rate at the end of December 2009 was £40.73*. The table below details the rate of each office at December 2009.

Grants Office	Rate
Ballyclare **	£86.55
Ballymena	£39.86
Belfast	£32.08
Craigavon	£32.61
Derry	£39.74
Dundonald	£37.68

Grants Office	Rate
Enniskillen	£35.11
Lisburn	£56.21
Newry	£33.36
Omagh	£37.76

Notes

- * The average processing rate refers to all activity related to a Grants application and is not an average based on the rate provided for each of the individual offices.
- ** This figure does not reflect the total office activity as the Housing Executive is implementing a new Private Sector Management System and Ballyclare is the lead Grants Office for implementation. The Ballyclare Grants Office processing costs will decrease in due course.

High Park Flats, Derry: Lack of Heating

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development if she has immediate plans to address the lack of heating in the High Park flats, Derry, given the inadequate heating system currently in place and the danger this poses to the health of tenants.

(AQW 4210/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive recently met with Firmus Energy and agreed that the gas distribution network will be extended into the High Park area by April 2010. Housing Executive tenants within High Park flats will now be consulted about gas installation with a view to making gas heating available within these homes during April 2010.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development 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 4233/10)

Minister for Social Development: Over the last year my Department has participated in discussions with DHSSPS and other health professionals on how best the objectives of the Investing for Health Strategy can be addressed. This dialogue has been conducted in bi-lateral meetings and through the appropriate oversight bodies, implementation groups or partnerships. Discussions have dealt with matters such as; fuel poverty, 'Early Years', suicide prevention, obesity, nutrition, physical activity, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health.

Neighbourhood Wardens in Ballymena

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many Neighbourhood Wardens currently operate in Ballymena; (ii) the areas for which they are responsible; and (iii) if there are any plans to introduce more.

(AQW 4241/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are currently three neighbourhood wardens operating in Ballymena District who provide a service for urban and rural estates as follows:-

Warden	Warden	Warden
Drumtara / Lettercreeve / Shanlieve / Shanowen	Dunclug / Dunvale / Millfield / Doury	Ballykeel 1 and Ballykeel 2
Portglenone	Broughshane	Ahoghill

Warden	Warden	Warden
South Harryville (including Larne Road Flats)	Clough	Kells
Cullybackey	Glarryford	Moorfields
Galgorm	Glenravel	North Harryville (including Chichester Park)
Adair	Fisherwick	
	Rectory	

The Wardens operate a reciprocal arrangement whereby each will deputise in the absence of the main warden for each of the above locations. The Housing Executive considers that the warden service operates well and efficiently, that the District is adequately covered, and therefore has no plans to introduce any further wardens.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many eligible people are currently awaiting heating and insulation measures under the Warm Homes Scheme.

(AQW 4254/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are currently approximately 2,300 applicants across Northern Ireland who have been deemed by the Scheme Managers to be eligible for assistance and are awaiting the provision of measures under the scheme. The Scheme Managers have a target to complete 90% of installations within 6 weeks from the date the property is surveyed and they are on track to meet this target.

Occupational Therapists' Reports

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development in how many cases the Housing Executive is awaiting reports from Occupational Therapists about the needs of individuals in Housing Executive properties.

(AQW 4255/10)

Minister for Social Development: The number of referrals relating to individuals in Housing Executive properties pending assessment by Occupational Therapists at the end of December 2009 was 195.

Executive Papers

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Social Development to list the subject matter of each of the 36 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 4270/10)

Minister for Social Development: The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential. I am therefore unable to provide you with the information you have requested.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how much funding has been allocated to the Warm Homes Scheme in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4281/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme budget for the last three years is set out in the table below.

	Budget (£m)
2007/08	£20.5
2008/09	£20.0
2009/10	£20.5

Community Safety Strategy for Older People

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made in putting in place a Community Safety strategy for older people.

(AQW 4282/10)

Minister for Social Development: In 2008 the Housing Executive launched its Community Safety Strategy 2008-2011: “Building Safer Communities”. The strategy established a three year action plan which focussed on the delivery of mainstream housing management services and inter agency partnership working, designed to address anti-social behaviour, crime and the fear of crime. This includes specific actions and services to address the needs and concerns of older people including:-

- The provision of Neighbourhood Wardens
- Inter agency funded Night Time Wardens
- The Intergenerational Programmes
- The Quick Check Initiative
- The Good Morning Projects
- Community Safety Partnerships

The Housing Executive works with a wide range of agencies to meet the specific needs of older households and will also seek to contribute to the delivery of recommendations set out in the recently published NIO strategy for older people “Safer Ageing: A Strategy and Action Plan for Ensuring the Safety of Older People”

Housing Stress

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many older applicants for social housing are currently known to be experiencing housing stress.

(AQW 4283/10)

Minister for Social Development: At 30 September 2009 there were 3,601 applicants on the Social Housing Waiting List over the age of 60 years deemed to be in housing stress.

Sheltered Housing

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many older people are currently on the waiting list for sheltered housing.

(AQW 4284/10)

Minister for Social Development: At 30 September 2009 there were 1,669 applicants over the age of 60 years registered on the Social Housing Waiting List requesting sheltered accommodation.

Grants for Environmentally Friendly Domestic Boilers

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she has considered offering grants to Housing Executive tenants to install environmentally friendly domestic boilers; and if so, how these grants would be distributed.

(AQW 4317/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has no plans to offer grants for tenants to install such systems. The Housing Executive already operates a programme of heating improvements for its housing stock which provides for efficient and controllable heating systems using gas, where available, or oil.

Town Centre Master Plans

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to list the town centre masterplans she has launched since 2007; and what funding her Department has given to each one.

(AQW 4403/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below shows the list of town centre master plans launched since 2007 and the level of funding provided to each plan.

Town	Funding
Armagh	£94,535
Ballycastle*	£94,752
Ballymena	£59,998
Omagh	£44,218

* Funding for the salary costs associated with a Project Officer to help prepare and implement a Town Development Strategy included in this amount.

Business Improvement Districts

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development whether legislation relating to Business Improvement Districts will be brought before the Assembly this year.

(AQW 4405/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department is currently working with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of the Environment (DOE) to progress the work required to determine the feasibility of statutory Business Improvement Districts in Northern Ireland. There would be a significant amount of preparatory work to be completed – including public consultation before possible legislation could be introduced into the Assembly. Consequently, it seems unlikely that this would happen this year.

Jobs and Benefits Offices: Attacks on Staff

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of recorded incidents of harassment or attacks, on staff in Jobs and Benefits offices, by members of the public in each of the past five years; and to provide a summary of the types of incidents recorded.

(AQW 4411/10)

Minister for Social Development: The attached table provides a breakdown of incidents of unacceptable customer behaviour recorded by my Department from 2005 to 2009 in the 10 Social Security Offices and the 25 Jobs and Benefits Offices. The figures totalled 1006 incidents over the 5 year period.

REPORTED INCIDENTS 2005 – 2009 (TOTAL - 1006)

Year	Type	Number
2005	Verbal	63
	Customers fighting	1
	Total	64
2006	Verbal	201
	Customer with weapon	1
	Items thrown	3
	Written abuse	1
	Total	206
2007	Verbal	284
	Items thrown	7
	Written abuse	2
	Threats	15
	Customers fighting	9
	Total	317
2008	Verbal	185
	Threat	14
	Assault	2
	Customers fighting	4
	Items thrown	5
	Total	210
2009	Verbal	193
	Customers fighting	4
	Damage	8
	Items thrown	3
	Assault on staff	1
	Total	209

Jobs and Benefits Offices: Staff Claims for Compensation

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the total number of claims for compensation from her Department made by staff in Jobs and Benefits offices arising from incidents of attack or harassment by the general public in each of the last five years; and (ii) the total amount of compensation paid by the Department as a result of these claims.

(AQW 4412/10)

Minister for Social Development: Details of claims for compensation made by staff in Jobs and Benefits offices arising from incidents of attack or harassment by the general public in each of the last five years is as follows.

Year	Total number of claims from staff in JBO for compensation arising from incidents of attack from the general public	Total number of claims from staff in JBO for compensation arising from incidents of harassment from the general public	Total amount of compensation paid
2005	0	0	0
2006	0	0	0
2007	0	0	0
2008	1	0	£1500
2009	0	1	Ongoing
Total	1	1	£1500

Community Care Grants

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications there were for Community Care Grants in the East Antrim constituency in each of the past 24 months; and how many of these were successful.

(AQW 4486/10)

Minister for Social Development: This information is not recorded in the format requested.

Welfare Rights Officers

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister for Social Development if she has any plans to introduce Welfare Rights Officers.

(AQW 4490/10)

Minister for Social Development: I have no plans to introduce Welfare Rights Officers within my Department.

Benefits for Cross-border Workers

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the recent meeting between her Department and the Department of Social and Family Affairs on improving the processing of claims for tax credits and social security benefits for cross-border workers.

(AQW 4518/10)

Minister for Social Development: Officials of the Social Security Agency (SSA) met with representatives from the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) on 28 October 2009. The meeting was convened by the North South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat with Mr Tommy Gallagher MLA also in attendance. Whilst Tax Credits are administered by HM Revenue and Customs, and therefore outside the remit of my Department, a useful discussion took place in relation to access to other social security benefits by cross border workers including those factors impacting on the speedy processing of benefit applications. A mechanism for referring individual cases to either the SSA or DSFA for appropriate investigation was agreed.

Economy 7 Heating in Housing Executive Properties

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties in the Newry and Armagh constituency are fitted with Economy 7 heating.

(AQW 4529/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. However, the Housing Executive currently has 269 properties in its Newry District Office area and 197 properties in its Armagh District Office area fitted with Economy 7 heating.

Social Security Agency Office at Urney Road, Strabane

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development if he can confirm that there will be no reduction in the level of front or back office services currently being provided at the Social Security Agency office at Urney Road, Strabane.

(AQW 4561/10)

Minister for Social Development: There will be no reduction in services provided to customers at the Social Security Office in Strabane. The consideration of any impact on the back office will be assessed in due course.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 19 February 2010

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

British-Irish Council

Mr A Ross asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what meetings of the British Irish Council are scheduled for the next six months.

(AQO 783/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): The British Irish Council (BIC) meets in both Summit and sectoral formats. Plans are being progressed for the next BIC Summit to be held in Guernsey in June 2010. A number of the BIC work streams are planning for Ministerial meetings in 2010. We will provide you with the details for these meetings once they are available.

BBC Spotlight Programme

Mr P J Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they intend to publish the detail of the legal advice provided to the First Minister following the allegations made by the BBC Spotlight programme.

(AQO 785/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The legal advice to which the Member refers was requested by the deputy First Minister and remains subject to legal professional privilege but consideration is being given to whether or how it could be released.

Advice was also sought from Senior Crown Counsel by the Departmental Solicitor's Office, at the request of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and any query regarding it would be a matter for DFP

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr T Clarke asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what additional resources have been allocated to the Planning Appeals Commission since devolution and what impact this has made.

(AQO 786/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: In delivering on our commitment within PSA21 we have allocated over £1.5 million in additional budget to the Planning Appeals Commission over the period 2008 – 2011. This has enabled us to appoint an additional 14 fee-paid Panel Commissioners to address the backlog of planning appeals, and to increase the Commission's capacity at senior levels to enable it to address an increasingly complex workload.

As a result, the planning appeals backlog has reduced from its height of over 3000 in 2007 to a figure of 846 at the end of January 2010. In addition, the Commission has continued to deliver on its referred public inquiry and hearing responsibilities.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr J McCallister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Presbyterian Mutual Society, including the outcome of negotiations with banks and financial institutions.

(AQO 787/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: On Friday 12th February we met with the Prime Minister to discuss the current circumstances of the Presbyterian Mutual Society. We know that this is a matter which continues to be of great concern to the members of PMS and the wider community and we are grateful for the widespread support that the work to find a solution enjoys and deserves in this Assembly.

Finding a remedy to the PMS problem is a complex matter and there are a number of challenging issues to deal with. This has meant that the work on a solution has taken longer than expected. However, we are expecting the full report on final considerations and options from officials very soon. The Administrator has told PMS members that it is in their best interests to await the outcome of the deliberations of the Working Group.

The judgment delivered by the High Court on Friday that small savers cannot be treated as creditors of the Society will, of course, be a disappointment for those members. The hardships being caused by the present status of the PMS has ever been in our thoughts. We can assure members, that, despite the unfortunate but necessary delays, we are working to secure the best outcome we can for PMS savers.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an estimate of the percentage of her annual budget which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.

(AQW 4326/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): DARD's net budget following December Monitoring is £262.5m. Virtually all of DARD's business could be described as preventative or early intervention, for example prevention of animal and plant disease or intervening to address rural poverty. However, if we limit the scope of this question to those areas which are engaged in directly preventative measures including programmes in respect of animal disease; flood defence and fisheries protection, then the costs are estimated at £66m, or 25%. This includes the costs of the Veterinary Service; and parts of the Rivers Agency and part of Fisheries Division.

Lost Crops

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 4057/10, why she asked the Executive for funding to compensate farmers affected by the recent rainfall and frost before carrying out a full assessment of the overall cost of lost crops.

(AQW 4435/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have raised the issue of the recent severe weather and the effect it has had on farmers, with my Executive Colleagues on 11 February. I am satisfied that they recognised the damage caused to some potato and vegetable crops, and they have agreed that I meet with the DFP Minister to discuss hardship funding. Subsequently, I have asked DARD officials to assess the crop damage caused by the severe frost in January 2010.

This damage assessment exercise will inform any future financial support consideration, subject to funding and the need to comply with EU State Aid rules.

As you are aware my Department is currently facing significant financial and other resource pressures across the board and while my sympathy is with those farmers who have suffered losses I am very mindful of the need to balance and manage expectations.

Tuberculosis

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department has spent on (i) departmental officials; and (ii) consultation reports and fees relating to the link between tuberculosis and badgers; and the date the latest consultation on this issue began.

(AQW 4449/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department does not have a retrospective record of the time spent by officials relating to this matter. Such information could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

A Badger Population Survey, as recommended by the Badger Stakeholder Group, was carried out for my Department during 2007/08. The Survey cost £199,000 and was an important exercise to obtain baseline data on the current badger population in the north of Ireland.

Research continues to investigate the prevalence of TB in badgers through the collection and post-mortem examination of badgers killed by road traffic accidents (the RTA Survey). The RTA survey is carried out by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI).

There has been no public consultation exercise initiated on this issue.

Tuberculosis

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to address the issues raised in the Public Accounts Committee report that highlighted that £22m has been spent investigating the link between tuberculosis and badgers; and how she intends to stop the spread of tuberculosis.

(AQW 4450/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The figure of £22 million quoted in the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report is the approximate annual cost of the TB Control programme, which includes the cost of TB testing and reactor compensation.

A Memorandum of Response (MOR) to the issues raised in the PAC Report was presented to the Assembly on 16 September 2009. The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee has oversight of the implementation of the PAC recommendations and will be updated regularly on progress and related funding issues.

In addition, and in line with the PAC recommendations, my Department submitted to the European Commission a TB Eradication Plan for 2010 setting out our TB programme for the surveillance, control and eradication of TB in cattle.

This TB Eradication Plan for 2010 was ratified by the EU Commission on 16 October 2009. Implementation of this Plan should help to secure a share of the 10 million euro funding from the EU Veterinary Fund for TB eradication in the north of Ireland, England and Wales.

EU Fisheries Council

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has met with County Down trawlermen and fish processors to discuss the outcome of the December fisheries talks in Brussels.

(AQW 4491/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have not met with representatives of fish processors or the NI Trawlermen's Trading Co. Ltd since the December Council. Both are represented on the Fisheries Forum and the outcome of Council was discussed with my officials at the last Forum meeting on 19 January. Forum members were given a copy of the Hansard of my 12 January statement to the Assembly and the subsequent question and answer session with Members. I am confident, therefore, that they are fully aware of the December Council outcomes. I anticipate that the Forum will take account of these outcomes in developing their recommendations to me which I expect to receive by Easter.

Rural Support Team

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to reduce staffing or funding for her Department's Rural Support Team.

(AQW 4506/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD like all other Departments is required to make savings to enable the Executive to work within its budget as well as enable it to address 2010/11 pressures in a strategic manner. My budget proposals to make these savings were presented to the ARD Committee on Tuesday 26 January 2010 as well as being made public. These proposals include one relating to making savings through a review of Rural Enterprise delivery. At this stage I have not made any firm decisions and this position will remain, pending the outcome of the consultation process.

Grants to Assist the Farming Community

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 8802/08, (i) to list the grants, including subsidy schemes, that are available from her Department to assist the farming community; and (ii) to outline the purpose, objectives, time-scale and eligibility criteria for each of these grants.

(AQW 4612/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table lists the grants and subsidy schemes available to assist the farming community:

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Single Farm Payment (SFP) scheme	Provides direct decoupled income support to farmers.	To provide income support to farmers on condition that certain standards concerning public, animal and plant health, the environment and animal welfare are met, and land maintained in good agricultural and environmental condition. (cross compliance).	Annual (reforms are expected from 2013 onwards).	Applicants must: be a farmer undertaking agricultural activity; hold Payment Entitlements and have eligible agricultural land; declare fields of 0.1 ha or more to activate SFP entitlements (except for Special Entitlements where applicants must maintain the required level of agricultural activity); have the land on which they claim at their disposal on 15 May in the year of the claim. They are also responsible for Cross-Compliance obligations.
Benchmarking	A scheme to facilitate benchmarking of farm and horticultural businesses.	To improve the business management and decision making process on farms. Reduction of costs, efficiency in terms of margin per hectare and quality of produce.	Currently open for applications.	Business ID Number.
Focus Farms	A scheme to promote new technologies and to provide an opportunity for coaching and/or mentoring.	Farmer is paid some monies toward farm enhancement and also for set up and running costs plus allowances for visitors. This is expected to be in the region of £17k per farm.	Currently open for applications.	Business ID Number.

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Family Farm Options	A scheme that will help farm families to analyse their current business position and to consider the future.	Where implementation of the strategy plan indicates the requirement of further specialist mentoring such as legal/financial input, the associated fees may be supported up to maximum of £250 per farm business.	Currently open for applications.	Business ID Number.
Supply Chain Partnerships (Training)	A scheme to provide training that will promote supply chain partnerships. This Scheme is linked to the Supply Chain Development Programme.	To increase the number of successful new collaborative initiatives in the agri-food and forestry sectors which lead to more effective and sustainable supply chains. This scheme is aimed at primary producers in the agri-food and forestry sectors co-operating with each other and with partners further along their respective supply chains, for example processors, retailers and other end users.	Currently open for applications.	Business ID Number.
Farm Modernisation Programme	To contribute to the competitiveness of agricultural and horticultural businesses in the north of Ireland.	Provide a grant of £5k towards investment in eligible equipment to improve the competitiveness of their enterprise.	The call for applications to Tranche 1 of the Farm Modernisation Programme closed at 4.00 p.m. on Tuesday 31 March 2009	Business ID Number

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
The Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances scheme	Contributes to maintaining and promoting sustainable farming systems which in particular take account of environmental protection requirements.	To improve the environment & the countryside by supporting land management.	Operates on an annual cycle. Applied for in March – May through the Single Application process, with payment early the following year.	<p>To claim you must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * have at least 3 hectares of eligible forage land in the SDA and/or DA; * keep enough eligible stock to meet the minimum 0.2 livestock units per hectare (ha) stocking density requirement; * have the land available and accessible to you and meet the stocking density requirement throughout the period of 1 April to 31 October; * adhere to the Cross-Compliance requirements; and undertake to farm in the Less Favoured Area (LFA) for five years from the first payment of a compensatory allowance.
NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS)	Payments are available to encourage farmers to adopt farming practices which improve the environment and countryside through land management.	To deliver the Programme for Government target: “Increase to 50 , the area of agricultural land in the NI covered by environmental enhancement agreements”.	Not currently open for applications.	NICMS is open to all farmers and land managers with a trading DARD Farm Business Identification Number and with at least three hectares of eligible land.

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Organic Farming Scheme	To provide payments to help farmers with the additional costs and loss of income which happens during the conversion period to organic production.	To deliver the Programme for Government target: "Increase to 50 , the area of agricultural land in NI covered by environmental enhancement agreements" .	Not currently open for applications.	OFS is open to all farmers and land managers with a trading DARD Farm Business Identification Number and with at least one hectare of horticultural land, or not less than 3 hectares of arable or improved or semi-improved land.
NI Rural Development Programme: Measure 3.1, 3.2 & 3.3	Farmers may avail of funding under these measures which aim to:- Assist farm households to diversify into non-agricultural activities and, as a consequence, maintain or increase the income of farm households and create employment opportunities. Create employment opportunities through promoting entrepreneurship and developing the economic infrastructure in rural areas by providing support to existing micro enterprises or to persons wishing to set up a new micro-enterprise in a non-agricultural sector. Use the natural resources in the north of Ireland's rural areas to attract visitors and create new employment opportunities through the sustainable development of the rural economy by providing support to existing rural tourism enterprises or to persons wishing to set up a new sustainable rural tourism enterprise.	Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the measure. Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the measure. Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the measure. Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the measure.	Currently open for applications.	Must be compatible with the priorities set in the Local Action Groups approved strategy and approved by that group. In addition as general requirements, projects must not be fulfilling a statutory responsibility/requirement; must not exceed de minimis aid; must not fund production of Annex 1 products; must not replace the funding responsibility of another government department or public body; must be not be double funded; and must fully meet the procurement and expenditure accountability requirements of both the European Commission and the National Government.

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Research Challenge Fund	<p>To provide grants to consortia of industry and research providers to carry out innovative, high quality, pre-commercial research and technological development projects which have the potential to further the sustainability of the north's agri-food and rural enterprises.</p> <p>Funding of up to 50% of eligible project costs will be available.</p>	<p>To improve the competitiveness of rural enterprises and create wealth from the research base in line with DARD Strategic Plan Goals 1 and 2.</p> <p>To increase the number of agricultural and rural enterprises engaging in effective R&D (including those participating for the first time) and the level of private sector expenditure on R&D.</p> <p>To increase the level of collaboration between the north's rural enterprises and the local, national and international research base.</p> <p>To increase collaboration and effective cooperation between rural enterprises.</p>	<p>It is anticipated that the scheme will open for applications during March/April 2010.</p> <p>Funding is currently available until 31 March 2011.</p>	<p>Projects must be collaborative i.e. all project partners participate in the design of the project, contribute to its implementation and share the risk and the output of the project.</p> <p>The industry partner will be either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> an SME representative body or levy body; a group of SMEs; or a group involving a large enterprise and one or more SMEs operating in the north. <p>The research partner will typically be a public sector research organisation in the north of Ireland, Britain or the south of Ireland.</p>

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Biomass Processing Challenge Fund	To support the purchase of a range of technologies that improve business efficiency and sustainability at farm level to produce renewable energy.	<p>To increase the adoption of renewable energy technology at farm level.</p> <p>To increase demand for biomass feedstocks.</p> <p>Displacement of fossil fuels with renewable energy.</p>	It is anticipated that the scheme will open in 2010.	Under development.
Agriculture and Forestry Processing and Marketing Grant	Improves economic performance and international competitiveness and encourages integration.	<p>To improve the economic performance and international competitiveness of the north's agri-food processing, horticulture and forestry sectors through use of technology together with sound manufacturing and environment management practices.</p> <p>To encourage greater integration and collaboration between producers and processors.</p>	Currently open for applications.	<p>Any micro-, small, medium or intermediate-sized enterprises with fewer than 750 employees involved in processing and marketing.</p> <p>Forestry Sector: Applications from the forestry sector are limited to micro-enterprises only.</p>

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Agriculture and Forestry Marketing Development Grant	Improves economic performance and international competitiveness.	To provide support to agri-food and forestry sector businesses seeking to improve their economic performance and international competitiveness.	Currently open for applications.	<p>The Scheme is open to micro-, small, medium and intermediate-sized enterprises involved or wishing to become involved in marketing including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • processors; • groups of producers who market their produce collaboratively; • individual producers who want to market their own produce; and • trade associations or industry bodies. <p>However, any applicant must be a separate legal entity. Also, in the case of the forestry sector the Scheme is limited to micro-enterprises.</p>

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Supply Chain Development Programme	Improves co-operation and collaboration leading to more effective and sustainable supply chains.	<p>To improve co-operation and collaboration in the agri-food and forestry sectors leading to more effective and sustainable supply chains.</p> <p>Support will facilitate co-operation and collaboration in supply chains between producers, processors and others.</p> <p>Support will facilitate the development of ideas and initiatives that improve the effectiveness and sustainability of supply chains.</p> <p>Support will facilitate the development of new supply chain relationships.</p>	Currently open for applications.	Groups with two or more businesses from the agriculture, horticulture or forestry supply chains are eligible to apply to the Supply Chain Development Programme. Groups must consist of farmers/growers but may also include processors and/or other suppliers of the produce of agriculture, horticulture or forestry.

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
<p>NI Rural Development Programme: Measures 3.4, 3.5 & 3.6</p>	<p>Rural dwellers may avail of funding under these measures which aim to:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the improvement of basic services in rural areas, including cultural and leisure facilities and related small-scale infrastructure. Support animation and capacity-building within and between villages and their surrounding rural areas in the formulation of integrated action plans to define the role of the village and fully develop the potential of villages and their surrounding areas. Use the natural resources in the north of Ireland's rural areas to create new employment opportunities and develop the rural economy through supporting local village initiatives to preserve and upgrade their rural heritage. 	<p>Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the measure.</p> <p>Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the measure.</p> <p>Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the measure.</p>	<p>Currently open for applications.</p>	<p>Must be compatible with the priorities set in the Local Action Groups approved strategy and approved by that group. In addition as general requirements, projects must not be fulfilling a statutory responsibility/requirement; must not exceed de minimis aid; must not fund production of Annex 1 products; must not replace the funding responsibility of another government department or public body; must be not be double funded; and must fully meet the procurement and expenditure accountability requirements of both the European Commission and the National Government.</p>
<p>Anti-Poverty / Social Exclusion</p>	<p>Rural dwellers may avail of funding under these schemes which aim to:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve childcare provision in rural areas. Improve access to transport for rural disadvantaged groups. Combat rural fuel poverty. Facilitate rural community and voluntary groups in addressing local poverty and social exclusion issues. Encourage rural community development. 	<p>Achievement of one or more of the outputs and results and/or impacts set for the scheme.</p>	<p>All schemes are currently active.</p>	<p>Eligibility varies by scheme.</p>

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
European Fisheries Fund (Aquaculture Measure)	To support investments in the construction, extension, equipping and modernisation of aquaculture production installations, in particular with a view to improving working conditions, hygiene, human or animal health and product quality, reducing negative impact or enhancing positive effects on the environment.	To support the growth and diversification of aquaculture, inland fishing, processing and marketing of fishery and aquaculture products, thereby improving profitability and competitiveness; and To promote improvements in production standards, environmental and welfare performance	Aug 2009 – Dec 2013	Grant support is limited to:- (a) licensed aquaculture businesses; (b) micro, small and medium sized enterprises
EU School Milk Subsidy Scheme	To encourage the consumption of milk products by making them available in schools at reduced cost.	To implement EU legislation which requires Member States to offer subsidised milk products to nursery, primary and secondary school children. A national subsidy is also paid.	Open	Participation by schools is at the discretion of school management. Participating schools liaise with relevant Education and Library Board who prepare claims for schools in their area.
Woodland Grant Scheme	Encourage expansion of tree cover in the north.	To provide assistance for creation of new woodlands through capital grants.	Open for applications all year round. Period of commitment - 20 years for mainly conifer and 30 for broadleaved woodland.	Minimum application area is 0.2 ha with a minimum width of 20 metres.

Name of Grant/Subsidy Scheme to Assist Farming Community	Purpose of Grant/Subsidy	Objective of Grant/Subsidy	Time-scale	Eligibility Criteria
Farm Woodland Premium Scheme	Encourage expansion of tree cover in the north.	To provide assistance for creation of new woodland by compensating for agricultural income foregone.	Open for applications all year round. Period of commitment - 20 years for mainly conifer and 30 for broadleaved woodland.	Applicants must be running an agricultural business, and the land to be planted must have been in agricultural use for three years with a minimum area of 1.0 hectare.
Short Rotation Coppice Scheme 2007	Increase the amount of Short Rotation Coppice grown for an energy end use in the north.	To provide assistance toward the cost of establishing Short Rotation Coppice.	Open for applications all year round. Five year commitment.	Available to those on agricultural holdings, with suitable land and a minimum area of 3.0 ha. Applicants must also demonstrate an energy end use for the crop.
Woodland Environment Grant	Encourage good management of existing woodlands.	To assist woodland owners to manage their woodland in a way that will contribute to the north's targets within the Biodiversity Action Plan, or improve the public amenity of their woodland.	Open for applications all year round. Period of commitment is dependant on nature and duration of project.	Minimum application area is 1.0 ha.
Sustainable Forest Operations Grant	Encourage good management of existing woodlands.	To provide a contribution toward the cost of eligible investments that will secure significant environmental benefits from the woodland.	Open for applications all year round. Period of commitment is dependant on nature and duration of project.	Minimum application area is 1.0 ha.

Red Meat Promotional Week

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that it is Red Meat Promotional Week, what assistance her Department is giving to the meat industry to promote their produce to the general public.

(AQW 4619/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Strict EU State Aid rules place severe constraints on the use of Government funds for promotional activities for local produce. Therefore DARD cannot provide direct funding for the marketing or advertising of red meat in the north of Ireland.

The promotion of red meat in both domestic and international markets is the responsibility of the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC). In addition to their ongoing promotional work, I understand that for the 'Red Meat Week' the LMC planned a range of activities including supermarket sampling; radio and press competitions; schools competitions and an inaugural Meat Academy where participants have the opportunity to learn more about NI Farm Quality Assured (NIFQA) Beef.

My Department, in conjunction with InvestNI, operates the NI Regional Food Programme (NIRFP), which provides financial support to 'not for profit' agri-food groups, to help promote quality regional food. Through groups who benefited from this programme, local red meat companies have had the opportunity to avail of promotional and sales opportunities at events such as the Balmoral Show Food Pavilion; the Fermanagh County Show Food Festival and the Glenarm Highland Games. The NIRFP is also part-funding Food NI's stand at the upcoming IFEX exhibition which offers further opportunities for red meat companies to promote their produce.

Code of Practice Between UK Supermarkets and Producers

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware of the code of practice between UK mainland supermarkets and producers which ensures that producers obtain a fair price for their produce; and if she has any plans to promote a similar code here.

(AQW 4661/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The recent introduction of a Groceries Supply Code of Practice (GSCOP) is a reserved matter and therefore not within my remit. However, I do welcome the introduction of this Code which applies to all retail groceries in Britain and the north of Ireland with an annual turnover in excess of £1 billion. Also, as I support fully the concept of fair pricing, I welcome the British Government's acceptance in principle of the need for a body to enforce the GSCOP (normally referred to as a "Supermarket Ombudsman") and the fact that it is currently consulting on the nature of such a body and what powers it might have. These are important developments which I hope will contribute positively to farmers receiving a fair deal.

Rural Development Support Teams

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans for the Rural Development Support Teams, including whether she intends to maintain their current level of resources.

(AQW 4750/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is required to make savings so that it can work within its budget and address the 2010/11 pressures in a strategic manner. My budget proposals to make these savings, includes one relating to a review of the work undertaken by the Rural Enterprise team. At this stage I have not made any firm decisions and this position will remain, pending the outcome of the consultation process outlined in the Review of 2010-11 Spending Plans for all Departments. I shall be taking on board the views expressed by stakeholders and others, which will collectively inform the final proposals I will take to the Executive.

Rural Development Programme

Mr I Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why her Department failed to provide match funding for Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme.

(AQO 752/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Both the delivery mechanism and the delivery areas for the Axis were new, and therefore new and robust foundations needed to be put in place for the Axis to be delivered. This included animation of the new areas, competition and appointment of new Local Action Groups and development of necessary infrastructures and supports and controls required to enable effective delivery. When the budget was established 3 years ago the various measures making up Axis 3 had not been fully designed. The administrative structures had not been put in place and it was not possible to estimate demand.

The Executive's Review of Public Expenditure provides the first opportunity to update the planning assumptions and allocations for 2010-11 that were made in the 2008 budget.

I propose to make an additional allocation of £5million National Capital Grant to increase the funding available for Axis 3, where a number of applications have now been brought forward and demand is now evident.

So far Joint Council Committees have approved 298 applications for grant aid worth £8.2million which were assessed by Local Action Groups. Of this, letters of offer worth around £4m have issued to project sponsors.

Forest Service Land in Carrickfergus

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much land in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area is currently under the management of the Forest Service.

(AQO 756/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Forest Service manages 835 hectares of forest, of which 743 hectares are on land owned by NI Water in Woodburn forest.

Necarne Equestrian Centre

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if a date has been confirmed with Fermanagh District Council for her Department's withdrawal from the Necarne Equestrian Centre, following the Audit Office report on the Irish Sport Horse Genetic Testing Unit Ltd.

(AQO 758/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A date of the 31 March 2012 has been agreed in principle with Fermanagh District Council for the withdrawal by my Department from the Necarne Equestrian Centre subject to the following conditions: -

1. My Department will maintain Necarne in its existing state and remain responsible for security, maintenance and rates for the Centre up until 31 March 2012;
2. My Department will remove from the Centre horses and items associated with equines to the value of around £60,000 by the withdrawal date;
3. My Department will permit the Council to market the Necarne Estate on the open market during the time up to the date of withdrawal; and
4. The Agreement to withdraw from Necarne will be financially neutral to DARD and the Council and that no monies will be paid to or received from either party.

This withdrawal is also subject to the necessary capital resource being available

Forestry Production

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department has any land for sale which could be used for forestry production.

(AQO 759/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department currently has land for sale at Enniskillen and Cookstown. However, it is not suitable for forestry production.

Forestry Bill

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the key elements of the Forestry Bill.

(AQO 760/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Key elements

The Bill will carry forward many of the existing key provisions such as the traditional and primary purpose of timber production and the powers to conduct everyday operations but will reflect the wider economic, environmental and social context of modern forestry. It will also introduce a range of powers such as:-

- development of forest land for other purposes than forestry to obtain better value from the public estate – this could include, for example, renewable energy projects or the development of tourist facilities on forestry land;
- the introduction of felling and regeneration licences to promote the sustainability of woodlands;
- a statutory right of pedestrian access to forestry land;
- powers to compulsorily acquire land to provide access to landlocked timber, or access for other functions, but only after all reasonable alternative options have been exhausted;
- powers to protect woodlands from damage by wild animals.

My officials are continuing to engage with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on the detail of the Bill.

EU Fisheries Council

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she is progressing the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting.

(AQO 761/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I said in my statement to the Assembly on 12 January, the December Fisheries Council negotiations started with a proposal to cut prawn Total Allowable Catch, or TAC, by 30% and we ended up with a 9% cut. Since then, by working with the industry and with the south we have reduced that further. When all is considered, the prawn quota available at the start of this year will be just 4% less than the total amount caught in 2009. There may be the opportunity for further quota swaps during the year and we should bear in mind that even with this cut Nephrops quota remains above the long term levels which existed up to 2006. Along with fish quotas, the fishing effort available in 2010 was also agreed at the December Council. As expected this was in line with the Cod Recovery Plan and there was a 25% cut in Irish Sea effort. The Cod Recovery Plan gives us very little flexibility and in order to maintain fishing time vessels will have to adopt cod conservation measures. I have therefore agreed that in 2010 the basic days at sea allowances are 124 days for whitefish vessels and 130 days for prawn vessels. More days are available if vessels adopt practices that result in lower cod catches, such as complying with additional closed fishing areas and adopting gears that allow cod to escape. Up to 200 days are available for vessels that adopt measures that result in less than 5% cod catch per trip. If vessels adopt sufficient cod conservations measures, which I hope they will, they will have enough time to catch the quotas available.

Loss of Local Potato Crop

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions her Department has had with the Tayto company about the potential loss of one third of the local potato crop.

(AQO 762/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To date (Monday 8 February @ 12.00 a.m.) there has been no approach by the Tayto company to my Department to discuss losses in the local potato crop.

However, officials from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise carried out advisory visits to three growers who supply potatoes to Tayto on 19 & 20 of January, and discussed the management of frost damaged crops.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Projects in Upper Bann

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the projects in which his Department has invested, in the Upper Bann Constituency, in each of the last three years; and the funding allocated to each project.

(AQW 4459/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): The information requested is detailed in the following tables.

TABLE 1 - 2006-07

Project Funded by	Project	Amount (£)
NI Museums Council	Contribution to costs of UV film (Craigavon Museum Service)	387
DCAL	Development of Kernan Lough (Peace II Project)	2,174
DCAL	Development of Fishing Facilities at Craigavon Lakes	91,194
DCAL	Replacement Bridge at Maghery Canal	146,441
Arts Council of NI	Art Work for New Mental Health Facility (Craigavon & Banbridge Community Health & Social Services Trust)	64,826
Arts Council of NI	Annual Support for Organisations Programme (Mid Armagh Community Network)	23,000
Arts Council of NI	Annual Support for Organisations Programme (Millennium Court Arts Centre)	40,788
Arts Council of NI	Opening Eyes & Minds (Millennium Court Arts Centre)	16,247
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Eddie Rafferty)	500
Arts Council of NI	Making It – Artist in Residency (Millennium Court Arts Centre)	21,000
Arts Council of NI	Start Up and Residency (Millennium Court Arts Centre)	22,500
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Edel Magill)	900
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Gary Duffy)	5,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (David Lyttle)	300

Project Funded by	Project	Amount (£)
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Victor Sloan)	2,702
Arts Council of NI	Reimaging Craigavon Communities (Craigavon Borough Council)	44,000
Arts Council of NI	Three Exhibitions Project (Millennium Court Arts Centre)	20,700
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Holger Christian Lonze)	4,000
Arts Council of NI	Musical Instruments for Bands Scheme (Mullabrack Accordion Band)	4,594
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Barry Brendan Kerr)	3,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Julie McGowan)	3,000
SELB	Roller Shutters (Brownlow Library)	7,856
SELB	General Minor Works (Lurgan Library)	33,264

TABLE 2 - 2007-08

Project Funded by	Project	Amount (£)
Arts Council of NI	Annual Support for Organisations Programme (Mid Armagh Community Network)	23,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Jonathan Cardwell)	400
Arts Council of NI	Annual Support for Organisations Programme (Millennium Court Arts Centre)	40,788
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Jonathan Toman)	1,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Feargal O'Malley)	1,240
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Stevie Scullion)	2,000
SELB	Windows & Painting (Banbridge Library)	35,300
SELB	General Minor Works (Lurgan Library)	3,420
Sport NI	Artificial Pitches & Equipment (Waringstown Cricket Club)	40,000

TABLE 3 - 2008-09

Project Funded by	Project	Amount (£)
Arts Council of NI	Annual Support for Organisations Programme (Millennium Court Arts Centre)	51,000
Arts Council of NI	Annual Support for Organisations Programme (All Set Cross Cultural Project)	25,000
Arts Council of NI	Annual Support for Organisations Programme (Mid Armagh Community Network)	23,000
Arts Council of NI	Community Based Shared Future Projects (Craigavon Borough Council)	50,000

Project Funded by	Project	Amount (£)
Arts Council of NI	Reimaging in Brownlow, Portadown & Lurgan (Craigavon Borough Council)	95,250
Arts Council of NI	Reimaging Project Management (Craigavon Borough Council)	17,000
Arts Council of NI	Brownlow Linear Park Phase II (Craigavon Borough Council)	50,000
Arts Council of NI	Portadown Community Treatment & Care Centre (Southern Health & Social Care Trust)	35,130
Arts Council of NI	Continuation of our arts programme (Donaghcloney Rural Needs Development Group)	36,763
Arts Council of NI	Ulster Drama Festival (Association of Ulster Drama Festivals)	10,100
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Dean Patrick Warner)	2,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Jimmy McAleavey)	4,000
Arts Council of NI	Garden of Reminiscence (Drumbeg North & South Residents Association)	15,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Brendan Fitzpatrick)	1,200
Arts Council of NI	Purchase of Musical Instruments (Clogher Youth & Music Club)	3,750
Arts Council of NI	Performances & Educational Outreach Projects (Ulster Scots Folk Orchestra Association)	10,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Holger Christian Lonze)	2,050
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Jamie Guiney)	1,600
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Eimear McGeown)	5,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Barry McSherry)	2,000
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Laura Kerr)	2,500
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Julie McGowan)	2,200
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Rob Durston)	600
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (Dougal McKenzie)	1,586
Arts Council of NI	Support for Individual Artist Programme (David Lyttle)	400
SELB	Wall Removal, New Carpet, Furniture & Shelving (Banbridge Library)	25,790
SELB	Asbestos Removal & Painting (Brownlow Library)	3,815
SELB	Kitchen Refurbishment (Lurgan Library)	38,180
Sport NI	Soccer Strategy Playing Facilities Programme (Annagh United FC)	84,872
Sport NI	Construction of GAA pitches, floodlights & fencing (Taghnevan Sports Limited)	245,000
Sport NI	Upgrade of rugby & training pitches (Lurgan RFC & Cricket Club)	126,093
NI Museums Council	Conservation Survey of Paper Items in Collection (Craigavon Museum Service)	455

Organisation of Large-scale Events

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to transfer the organisation of large-scale events from his Department to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board; and if so, when.
(AQW 4554/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The department does not directly organise large –scale events itself, but does assist in the delivery of such events by supporting others in their organisation, through financial support, or by establishing partnerships to coordinate their delivery. The functions formerly exercised by the Northern Ireland Events Company are, following a recommendation from the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland, proposed to transfer from my Department to the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment subject to Executive approval.

Proposed Orange Museums

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the potential cultural contribution of the proposed Orange museums in Loughgall and Belfast.
(AQW 4614/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I welcome this initiative that is being taken forward by the Orange Order. It can only help to increase understanding of the Orange tradition and contribute to a shared and better future in Northern Ireland.

The Order has an unparalleled historical collection of material relating to Orangeism and the Order's REACH Project (Reaching out through Education And Cultural Heritage) aims to secure funding for 2 museums enabling preservation, interpretation and access to the collection.

I commend and endorse this approach and wish the Order every success with these two museum projects.

Fisheries (Amendment No. 2) Byelaws (Northern Ireland) 2004

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to specify the changes introduced under Statutory Rule No 504, Fisheries (Amendment No. 2) Byelaws (Northern Ireland) 2004; and to detail any consultations his Department held prior to introducing this Statutory Rule.
(AQW 4664/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In 2005 the Department re-defined the area on Lower Lough Erne where fishing ground bait and maggots were permitted.

Before introducing the amendment above, the Department consulted with the Fisheries Conservancy Board which was at that time, the representative stakeholder Forum for salmon and inland fisheries interests. The Board approved the change to the ground bait and maggots line on the 23rd March 2004.

Subsequently, the Board introduced the Fisheries (Amendment No.2) Byelaws 2004 (S.R. 504) which re-aligned the Lower Lough Erne area on which a coarse fishing licence was valid, with the new ground bait and maggots line. As this amendment was considered a consequential change following on from the already approved new ground bait and maggots line, no further consultation was considered necessary.

Other changes introduced by Statutory Rule No. 504 included an increase in fishing licence duties, amendment to the River Lagan and Lough Money coarse fish areas and the creation of two new rainbow trout waters.

London 2012 Olympics

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any meetings he has planned for the next six months aimed at ensuring Northern Ireland can benefit from the London 2012 Olympics.
(AQW 4692/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department leads and co-ordinates Northern Ireland's response to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. I chair a Northern Ireland 2012 Leadership

Group that provides strategic direction, advice and guidance to ensure that NI maximises the unique opportunities presented by the Games and the delivery of a sporting, social and economic legacy. The 2012 Leadership Group meets 3 times per year with the next meeting scheduled for 5 May 2010. Membership includes the Chairpersons from Arts Council NI, Disability Sport NI, SportNI, NITB, InvestNI, and senior representatives from the Department of Education NI, Department of Employment and Learning NI, Local Government, the Volunteer Development Agency and a NI VIP Ambassador.

Senior Officials from DCAL are represented on the Nations and Regions Group (NRG) of the London Organising Committee for the Games. This forum meetings on a regular basis and consists of representatives from the 9 English regions and 3 nations of the UK. Involvement ensures that Northern Ireland is kept up to date about opportunities for participating in and benefitting from the 2012 Games and to learn and share with colleagues across the UK any best practice in relation to 2012 activity and wider legacy programmes.

William Kennedy International Piping Festival

Mr M Brady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why he refused an application for funding under the Events Growth Fund for the William Kennedy International Piping Festival in 2010, given that an economic impact survey by Armagh City and District Council found that this festival has contributed significantly to the Armagh economy in the past.

(AQW 4805/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Applications to my department's events funding schemes are assessed against an objective criteria which while taking the economic benefit an event may deliver into account, also considers the contribution the proposed event makes to the delivery of a number of other objectives. I understand a proposal has to deliver across the range of criteria to be eligible for funding.

A number of applications have been made to the Events Growth Fund and Major Events Fund. Successful applicants have been advised and those that have been unsuccessful have had an opportunity to appeal. Until such appeals have been considered I am unable to comment on individual cases.

Community Arts

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the criteria used to classify groups as 'Community Arts Organisations' for funding purposes.

(AQO 768/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is the body responsible for disbursing DCAL's funding for community arts. It does not have dedicated budgets for particular art form areas, but rather allocates funding on the basis of applications received from organisations and individuals.

The Arts Council classifies a group as a community arts organisation by analysing where its activities take place and who the beneficiaries are. It considers community arts to be about local people having access to and being able to participate in their chosen medium of art from the spectrum of art forms.

Community arts is a process. It harnesses the transformative power of original artistic expression to produce a range of social, cultural and environmental benefits. It provides opportunities for communities and participants to develop their own skills as artists as well as for artists to explore ways of transferring those skills.

Government funding of the arts cannot be narrow and exclusive – it must be as broad and inclusive as possible.

Providers of community arts range from large established arts organisations to small community-based groups at the grass roots. The range of settings is broad, including arts centres, community centres, neighbourhood halls, prisons, youth centres and public spaces.

Strangford Lough

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what efforts his Department has made to enhance and promote the sporting and recreational potential of Strangford Lough.

(AQO 769/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Strangford Lough is recognised as a major resource for sport and recreation. Consequently, Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, works closely with relevant stakeholders to assist in maximising the sporting and recreational potential of the Lough.

In that role, SNI has provided support to the Countryside Access and Activities Network for the development of the Strangford Lough Canoe Trail. It has also assisted Strangford Lough Yacht Club in developing sailing activities and is represented on the Strangford Lough Management and Advisory Committee which advises on the strategic management of Strangford Lough. In addition, SNI, through the Tollymore Mountain Centre, has helped the governing body for canoeing here, the Canoe Association of Northern Ireland, with the development and running of the annual Strangford Challenge Kayaking Marathon.

Community Arts

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he can provide an assurance that budget cuts within his Department will not have a detrimental impact on the work of community based arts organisations.

(AQO 770/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department and its arms length bodies will continue to support community based arts organisations to find appropriate funding and maximise value for money.

However, there is a need to be realistic about the funding which will be available. We are in a very tight public expenditure climate and funding for the arts, like all areas of Government expenditure, has been reduced for 2010/11 and will be under increasing pressure going forward.

Given these pressures, it is important to recognise that community organisations cannot rely solely on central government funding. Local government must take responsibility by prioritising arts funding and addressing the huge gap between the council areas which provide most and least funding per person for the arts.

The Arts Council will need to consider all future applications for funding from community arts organisations in the context of DCAL and Arts Council strategies, and in light of its revised budget allocations.

Irish-Language Strategy

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number and type of engagements that his Department has undertaken with Irish language organisations in the last two years in relation to the development of an Irish Language Strategy.

(AQO 772/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Representatives from my Department have met with Irish language organisations on seven occasions on issues relating to the Minority Languages Strategy in the last two years. This includes:

- 4 meetings with Pobal – 24 January 2008, 30 September 2008, 4 June 2009 and 19 October 2009.
- 2 meetings with Foras na Geailge – 24 January 2008 and 28 October 2008.
- A meeting with the Irish Guild of the Church of Ireland – 19 January 2009.

These meetings were consultative in nature.

I have also met with Irish language organisations such as An Gaeláras in Londonderry and An Cultúlann in West Belfast.

In addition I visited the Gaelic college on the Isle of Skye to attain another view of language development and that will help to inform the Strategy.

Furthermore, I recently met with the Education Minister to discuss the linkages between education and the Language Strategy - particularly with respect to cultural identity in the classroom, the delivery of children's rights and appropriate training and creative training materials for teachers.

Sport and Physical Activity

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department's revised budget will impact on the promotion of sport and physical activity.

(AQO 773/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department's proposed budget for 2010/11 gives Sport NI an uplift of £2m in its resource budget as compared to 2009/10, an increase of 23%. It is also being allocated a £7m increase in its capital budget above that originally indicated in CSR 2008/11.

The proposed increase in the indicative 2010/11 Sport NI resource and capital budgets represents a significant investment in sport at a time of financial stringency and will assist in the meeting the Executive's and the Department's PSA targets.

The indicative allocations notified to DCAL's Arms Length Bodies are provisional and may be subject to adjustment, either upwards or downwards, following the period of consultation on the draft budget.

Milwaukee Irish Fest

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department will reconsider its approach to the Milwaukee Irish Fest 2010, given that this festival is North America's largest celebration of Irish music and culture.

(AQO 774/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster-Scots Agency has been approached by the organisers of the Milwaukee Irish Fest and the Agency plans to support the event in 2010. The Agency's Board have agreed to set aside £7,000 to facilitate funding for the event. An open tender exercise will be carried out to identify a suitable group to showcase Ulster-Scots.

I remain supportive of celebrating links with America and for musicians from all backgrounds in Northern Ireland to showcase their talent on the international stage and access new networks and industry connections.

To this end the Arts Council schemes which facilitate artists travelling to America and the Creative Industries Innovation Fund will continue to support these types of activities.

Cultural Links with Scotland

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the ongoing work by his Department to strengthen cultural links with Scotland.

(AQO 775/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am committed to the enhancement and promotion of Northern Ireland's shared cultural, historical and social connections with Scotland. A number of initiatives and programmes have been undertaken by my Department, through its associated arms length bodies to develop and indeed strengthen our cultural links.

Some examples of these are set out below.

- The Ulster-Scots Agency is involved with several Scottish Local Authorities who have participated in schools exchange programmes.
- DCAL through Foras na Gaeilge supports the Colmcille Initiative which fosters support for the Gaelic languages and develops links between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland.
- I have also held discussions with Scottish Government Ministers and Academics on a number of initiatives such as the Scottish Language Dictionaries Project and the Kist o Riches project which is an exciting and innovative project which aims to digitise, catalogue and disseminate Gaelic and Scots sound recordings online.
- The Arts Council of Northern Ireland has ongoing contact with the Scottish Arts Council, including regular meetings at various levels which aim to strengthen and develop cultural links. Recently, the two Arts Councils have been exploring literary development on an East-West basis in conjunction with the Scottish Book Trust and Scottish Poetry Library.
- Links between Northern Ireland and Scotland in relation to literary festivals, Ulster-Scots festivals and storytelling traditions are also currently being developed.
- The Arts Council also takes part in UK wide initiatives in collaboration with all four UK Arts Councils, for example an international touring fund which has brought the Scottish Opera and Ballet to the Grand Opera House.
- Northern Ireland Screen has awarded £126,000 to partly fund a documentary series entitled 'Dissenting Voices'. The series is scheduled to be broadcast in 2010 on both BBC NI and TG4 and will illustrate what life was like on both sides of the Irish Sea at the time of the plantation of Ulster.

Irish-Language Strategy

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the main elements of the Irish Language Strategy.

(AQO 776/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since coming into office at the beginning of July 2009, I have given special attention to the development of a Minority Languages Strategy.

It is my intention to bring forward a draft Strategy to the Executive by the end of March which can then go out to consultation.

One strand of this Strategy will be to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language as set out in Section 15 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews) Act 2006.

The preparation of this draft Minority Languages Strategy will require engagement with, and commitments from, a number of other Northern Ireland Executive departments - especially in relation to education - and from the United Kingdom government in relation to broadcasting.

Arts Funding

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the recent funding cuts to the arts sector and the potential to negate the benefits of previous capital investment in the arts.

(AQO 777/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL and the Arts Council have made a significant investment in the capital arts infrastructure in Northern Ireland in recent years. A number of venues opened in 2009 including the Playhouse, Waterside Theatre and An Gaelaras in Londonderry and two venues will open in Belfast in 2010/11 – the Crescent and Lyric Theatres.

DCAL continues to invest in this area and work on the new Metropolitan Arts Centre for St Anne's Square started in December 2009.

The projects already completed provide artists, the local community and visitors with excellent venues to participate in and enjoy a wide spectrum of the Arts.

Arts Council will continue to support venues and artists on behalf of DCAL, in line with Departmental priorities.

Department of Education

Former Faughan Valley School, Derry

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Education if she would consider the former Faughan Valley School site, Derry, as a location for a Meanscoil.

(AQW 4311/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): The former Faughan Valley School site remains in the ownership of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB). It is therefore a matter for that Board to determine its future use or disposal.

Chomhairligh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine an Iarthair (WELB) nár cuireadh in iúl aon spéis i bpríomhshuíomh an choláiste agus tá sé beartaithe ag an WELB é a chur de láimh ar an mhargadh oscailte. Tá díospóireachtaí faoi bhealach maidir le suim Chomhairle Cathrach Dhoire i bpáirceanna imeartha na seanscoile a cheannach.

The WELB has advised that there has been no Public Sector or educational interest expressed in the main college site and the WELB therefore intends to dispose of it on the open market. Discussions regarding Derry City Council's interest in acquiring the former school's playing fields are on-going. However, on foot of your question I have today written to CnaG to suggest that they write directly to the WELB to lodge an interest in the site if considered an appropriate location for the development of a new Meanscoil.

Schools Funding

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the amount of funding provided by her Department to (a) preparatory schools of fee-paying grammar schools; (b) Catholic maintained schools; and (c) Irish-medium schools; (ii) the number of such institutions in Northern Ireland; and (iii) the number of pupils who attended each type of institution, in the academic year 2008/09.

(AQW 4466/10)

Minister of Education: The Independent Strategic Review of Education (known as the Bain Report), published in December 2006, highlighted the issue of the funding of Preparatory Schools. In respect of the allocation of the education budget, it stated: "Equity must continue to be at the heart of this distribution. For this reason, the part-funding of fee-charging preparatory departments in grammar schools is anomalous. This aspect of delegation subsidises provision that can only be accessed by children whose parents can pay the requisite fee. This would seem to be an inequitable use of public funds and counterintuitive in a funding system simultaneously managing the pressures of a high level of surplus capacity. The rationale for this aspect of schools-related current expenditure should be reviewed and its continuation considered with regard to equity and in the context of the significant pressures on the education budget".

One of the key recommendations of the Bain Report (recommendation 5) was that:

"The rationale for funding preparatory departments in grammar schools should be reviewed".

The Equality Commission has adopted a position where it considers that a key component of a quality education system is the provision of equality of access to good education. In relation to its position on the funding of Preparatory Departments, the Commission has stated that:

“Preparatory Departments inherently do not provide equality of access as attendance is dependant on a parents /families ability to pay additional substantial costs. We do not believe a public subvention to this sector is the best possible use of public funds when there are other areas that we have prioritised for intervention in the above document”. (“Above document” refers to Every Child an Equal Child)

Faigheann scoileanna cistiú ar bhonn bliana airgeadais in ionad ar bhonn bliana acadúla. Tá an t-eolas atá soláthraithe thíos don bhliain airgeadais 2008/2009, i leith daltaí coibhéiseacha lánaimseartha (FTEanna), bunaithe ar shonraí daonáirimh Dheireadh Fómhair 2007.

Schools receive funding on a financial year rather than an academic year basis. The information provided below is for the 2008/2009 financial year, for funded full-time equivalent pupils (FTEs), based on October 2007 census data.

	2008/09 Funding £'000 ⁽³⁾	Number of Institutions Funded	Number of Funded FTE Pupils
Preparatory Departments of grammar schools	1,905	16	2,411
Catholic Maintained Schools ⁽¹⁾	400,324	508	117,986
Irish-medium Schools ⁽²⁾	8,768	23	2,616

Notes:

- (1) Catholic Maintained nursery, primary and secondary schools
- (2) Irish-medium primary and secondary schools
- (3) Funding information based on Outturn figures provided by the relevant Funding Authority, based on the 2008/09 financial year.

Newbuild Schools: Number of Classrooms

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of her Department's policy of deciding the appropriate number of classrooms for new build schools based on long-term enrolment figures.
(AQW 4489/10)

Minister of Education: Schedules of accommodation for Primary schools are calculated on the basis of Long Term Enrolment (LTE) bands. For example, a new Primary school with a LTE of 176-205 would have an entitlement of 7 teaching spaces and other ancillary accommodation as detailed in the Primary Schools Building Handbook. Details of all the enrolment bands and associated schedules of accommodation can be found in Section 3 of the Handbook. This can be found on the DE website and can be accessed using the following link: www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/13-schools_estate_pg/13-content-buildinghandbook/13-schools_estate_primary_pg.htm

Cuireann méid agus nádúr na cóiríochta múinteoireachta le bheith soláthraithe i bhfoirgnimh nua iar-bhunscoileanna riachtanas an churaclaim sa tuaisceart san áireamh agus cinntear é trí fhoirmle a chuireann roinnt fachtóirí san áireamh, lena n-áirítear (i) rollú fadtéarma faofa; (ii) cóimheas daltaí le múinteoirí; (iii) cóimheas teagmhála chun an chothromhaíocht idir am múinteoireachta amchláraithe agus am neamhmhúinteoireachta a chur san áireamh; agus (iv) Fachtóir Úsáide Seomra a cheadaíonn solúbthacht le haghaidh amchláraithe agus chun trealamh teagaisc a ullmhú idir ranganna.

The extent and nature of teaching accommodation to be provided in new build Post-Primary schools takes account of the requirement of the Curriculum in the north and is determined by a formula that takes account of a number of factors including (i) the approved LTE; (ii) the Pupil Teacher Ratio; (iii) a Contact Ratio to take account of the balance between time-tabled teaching time and non-teaching

time; and (iv) a Room Usage Factor which allows flexibility for timetabling and the setting up of teaching equipment between classes.

These arrangements have been operation for a number of years and are deemed to be fair and equitable to schools in all sectors.

Exams: Pupils Cheating

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of recorded incidents of pupils cheating in (a) GCSE; and (b) A level exams in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4534/10)

Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn aird an Chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé do Thomas Burns MLA (Aontroim Theas) ar AQW 4517/10 a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 12 Feabhra 2010 a mhionsonraíonn an t-eolas seo.

I refer the Member to the answer I provided to Thomas Burns MLA (South Antrim) to AQW 4517/10 published in the Official Report on 12 February 2010 which details this information.

Number of Schools

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail the current number of (i) nursery schools; (ii) primary schools; and (iii) secondary (a) high schools; (b) grammar schools; and (c) Irish-medium schools in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 4560/10)

Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sonraithe sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the table below.

School type	ELB					Total
	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	
Nursery schools	32	15	19	20	12	98
Irish medium primary schools	8	4	2	2	6	22
Primary schools (non-Irish medium)	85	207	154	221	177	844
Irish medium post-primary	1	0	0	0	0	1
Post-primary (non-Irish medium)	18	35	27	38	31	149
Grammar	16	16	10	14	13	69

Nursery, primary and post primary schools by Education and Library Board – 2009/10

There are a number of Irish medium voluntary and private pre-school centres, as well as a number of Irish medium units situated in primary and post-primary schools. These units have been included in the counts of schools in the table above. They are shown separately in the table below.

School type	ELB					Total
	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	
Irish medium units in primary schools	0	1	1	5	2	9
Irish medium units in post-primary schools	0	0	0	1	1	2

School type	ELB					Total
	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	
Irish medium voluntary and private pre-school centres	6	8	3	10	8	35

Source: school census

Note: Figures for primary schools (non-Irish medium) include 17 preparatory departments in grammar schools.

School Closures During the Recent Cold Spell

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education how many pupils were kept home from school as a result of school closures during the recent cold spell.

(AQW 4577/10)

Minister of Education: Chuaigh druidimí scoile i bhfeidhm ar thuairim is 21,000 dalta mar gheall ar fhadhbanna a bhaineann le coinníollacha drochaimsire i mí na Nollag agus i mí Eanáir.

Approximately 21,000 pupils were affected by school closures due to problems associated with the adverse weather conditions in December and January.

For details of each school that was closed and the length of closures I would refer the Member to the answer I provided to AQW 4127/10 tabled by Thomas Burns MLA and published in the Official Report on 05 February 2010.

Former Faughan Valley School, Derry

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Education if it is her Department or the Western Education and Library Board that has the authority to gift the former Faughan Valley School for use as a Meanscoil.

(AQW 4594/10)

Minister of Education: Tá iarscoil Faughan Valley faoi uinéireacht Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair (BOLI). Faoi Alt 106(5) den Ordú um Oideachas agus Leabharlanna 1986, ní féidir le BOLI aon talamh ná réadmhaoin a dhiúscairt gan fáth muna bhfaigheadh sé ceadú na Roinne. Eisítear na socruithe ar dhiúscairt talún breise ag Seirbhísí Talún agus Réadmhaoin na Roinne Airgeadais agus Pearsanra. De réir na teorach, éilítear ar an Roinn a chinntiú go mbaintear an luach is fearr amach.

The former Faughan Valley School is in the ownership of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB). Under Article 106(5) of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 the WELB cannot dispose of any land or premises gratuitously unless the approval of the Department is obtained. The arrangements for the disposal of surplus land are detailed in guidance issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services. In accordance with the guidance Department's are required to ensure that best value is obtained.

The WELB has advised that there is no Public Sector or educational interest in the site and the WELB therefore intends to dispose of it on the open market. I have advised CnaG that, if in the context of their strategic vision for post-primary provision, the site of the former post-primary school is deemed appropriate for a new Meanscoil to write directly to the WELB to lodge their interest.

Bullying

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Education to outline the process followed by schools in dealing with instances of bullying.

(AQW 4598/10)

Minister of Education: Cuireann an tOrdú um Oideachas agus Leabharlanna 2003, a tháinig i ngníomh ar 1 Aibreán 2003, ceanglais ar gach scoil dheontaschúnta le beartas frithbhulaíochta a bheith acu ina bpolasaí airíonachta a chuimsíonn bearta ar gach foirm de bhulaíocht i measc daltaí a chosc.

Déantar monatóireacht ar éifeachtacht na mbeart seo tríd na hiniúchtaí rialta a dhéantar ar shocruithe tréadchúraim.

The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003, which came into operation on 1 April 2003, places a duty on all grant-aided schools to have an anti-bullying policy within their Discipline policy which includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. The effectiveness of these measures is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections of pastoral care arrangements.

The Department's publication 'Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour' offers detailed guidance, practical initiatives and case studies to support schools to tackle bullying. It also provides advice about supporting the child who has been bullied and dealing with the bully. The guidance suggests that schools should include in its anti-bullying policy an undertaking to:

- investigate thoroughly any reported or suspected instances of bullying;
- listen to, consult, and protect and support the victims at all times;
- take all necessary steps to identify those responsible, deploy appropriate sanctions, and give them help to change their behaviour; and
- report back, fully and promptly, to any parent who has raised with the school a concern about bullying.

Whilst the Department has issued this guidance to schools, it is for each school to determine, taking account of its own ethos and circumstances, in consultation with pupils and parents, the detail of their policy and hence, how they will deal with a bullying incident within the school.

My Department has funded the local Anti-bullying Forum to develop, in conjunction with the five Education and Library Boards, a resource which will assist schools in responding to alleged incidents of bullying. This resource will map out different stages in managing an alleged bullying incident, and offer a range of interventions that schools may use, which support both the young person being bullied and the young person bullying others. The Forum's website (www.niabf.org.uk) hosts a range of information and resources to support teachers in delivering strong anti-bullying messages in their schools.

In terms of other support available for victims of bullying, the Department funds Childline NI to provide a dedicated anti-bullying telephone helpline for pupils and young people.

The independent schools' counselling service is also available in all grant aided post-primary schools allowing pupils to speak to a trained counsellor about their concerns or fears around bullying.

Bullying

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of recorded instances of bullying in schools since May 2007; and (ii) what progress her Department has made in addressing bullying in schools.

(AQW 4599/10)

Minister of Education: Níl fáilte roimh bhulaíocht, in aon fhoirm ar bith agus mar gheall ar aon fháth ar bith, i scoileanna. Faoi láthair, ní éilítear ar scoileanna taghmhais bhulaíochta a thaifeadadh, agus bheadh mo Roinn buartha faoi chur le hualach maorlathach atá ar scoileanna ag an am seo trí cheanglais a chur ar phríomhoidí a leithéid a dhéanamh.

Bullying, in whatever form and for whatever reason, has no place in schools.

Schools are not currently required to record incidences of bullying and my Department would be concerned about adding to the bureaucratic burden on schools at this time by requiring Principals to do so.

However, the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003, which came into operation on 1 April 2003, places a duty on all grant-aided schools to have an anti-bullying policy which includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. The effectiveness of these measures is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections.

The Department recognises that it cannot solve 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 (NIABF). The Forum enables members to share models of best practice, disseminate information, to develop and coordinate joint initiatives and to ensure that schools and organisations working with children and young people are able to develop appropriate strategies to prevent and deal with bullying behaviours.

From early 2006, the Department has been funding a regional coordinator post attached to the NIABF. The coordinator is involved delivering the 3-year Anti-Bullying Strategy which includes the development, implementation and promotion of models of good practice, developing parental partnerships, website development and an annual anti-bullying week.

The Forum and the Department are also members of the British and Irish Anti-Bullying Forum through which formal links have been established with similar bodies in the South, England, Wales and Scotland.

The Education and Library Boards have established an Inter-Board Group, which is developing a common approach to tackle bullying in schools. Each Board has a designated officer who works with schools to tackle bullying through assisting in the development of whole school policies and supporting individual pupils who have been victims of bullying.

In June 2007, the Department published a research report on “The Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland”. The findings show little change in the level of bullying behaviour reported by pupils compared to an earlier study completed in 2002. A research exercise will be commissioned by the Department next year with a view to a further comparative publication in 2012.

The Department continues to fund Childline NI to provide a dedicated anti-bullying telephone helpline for pupils and young people.

The independent schools' counselling service is available in all grant aided post-primary schools allowing pupils to speak to a trained counsellor about their concerns or fears around bullying.

Educational Underachievement

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Education what action she has taken in relation to educational underachievement among working class Protestant pupils.

(AQW 4601/10)

Minister of Education: Maireann míbhuntáiste oideachasúil i measc Protastúnach agus Caitliceach, buachaillí agus cailíní araon. Baineann sé le míbhuntáiste socheacnamaíoch agus cuirtear easpa dóchais leis ró-mhinic.

Educational disadvantage exists among Protestants and Catholics, boys and girls, and among our ethnic minorities. Too often, it is related to socio-economic disadvantage and compounded by poverty of aspiration.

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 put an end to these detrimental impacts, particularly on our most disadvantaged young people.

My focus is on tackling underachievement wherever it exists and improving outcomes for all our 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 inter-connected policies aimed at ensuring every child fulfils her or his potential – Every School a Good School, Transfer 2010, the revised curriculum, the literacy and numeracy strategy, the review of SEN and Inclusion, the Achieving Belfast and Derry programmes and the establishment of ESA.

Meetings with Counterparts in the Irish Republic

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Education if the proposed meeting between her officials and their counterparts in the Irish Republic has taken place, as agreed in the North South Ministerial Council meeting of 25 November 2009; and if so, to detail the outcome.

(AQW 4602/10)

Minister of Education: The meeting took place on 11 December 2009. My officials have since undertaken a survey of border schools in the North to identify the numbers of pupils crossing the border. This has identified 259 pupils travelling to the North on a daily basis to schools of both communities. I am awaiting the figures from the South of Ireland on the numbers of pupils travelling to schools in the South.

Tá sé ar intinn agam tograí a tharrait anuas os comhair an Choiste Fheidhmiúcháin chun an ainmhrialtacht seo a bhaint. I ré na gluaiseachta saoire seo san Eoraip, caithfidh muid bacainní ar shoghluaiseacht a bhaint le cinntiú go gcloítear le cearta saoránach na hEorpa.

I plan to bring forward proposals to the Executive in relation to this matter. In this day and age of free movement within the European Union, we need to remove obstacles to mobility and ensure that European citizens' rights are adhered to.

Detached Youth Provision in Belfast

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education to detail the budget provided for detached youth provision in Belfast for (i) 2007/08; (ii) 2008/09; and (iii) 2009/10, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 4617/10)

Minister of Education: The Department of Education provides funding to the Education and Library Boards for the provision of Youth Services in their areas. It is the responsibility of each of the Boards to decide how it distributes its budgets and resources taking account of the need to ensure that resources are allocated on an equitable basis and based on an assessment of objective need. As a result, the provision and funding of Youth Services in local areas will change over time.

Sholáthar Príomhfheidhmeannaigh de Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste, de Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt agus de Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt an t-eolas seo a leanas ar leithdháiltí an bhuiséid i leith soláthair scortha don ógra le linn na mblianta airgeadais 2007/08 go 2009/10.

The Chief Executives of the Belfast, South Eastern and North Eastern Education and Library Boards have provided the following information on the budget allocations for detached youth provision during the financial years 2007/08 to 2009/10:

Constituency area	ELB	2007/08 (£)	2008/09 (£)	2009/10 (£)
Belfast East	BELB	83,011	114,801	135,400
	SEELB	12,500	65,000	69,000
Belfast North	BELB	113,097	153,379	203,100
	NEELB	65,358	50,667	62,004
Belfast South	BELB	163,934	145,561	101,550
	SEELB	13,000	15,300	15,500
Belfast West	BELB	195,913	292,134	236,950
	SEELB	98,000	99,000	100,000

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Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education to detail the budget provided to the Belfast Education and Library Board for detached youth provision for (i) 2007/08; (ii) 2008/09; and (iii) 2009/10, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 4618/10)

Minister of Education: The Department of Education provides funding to the Education and Library Boards for the provision of Youth Services in their areas. It is the responsibility of each of the Boards to decide how it distributes its budgets and resources taking account of the need to ensure that resources are allocated on an equitable basis and based on an assessment of objective need. As a result, the provision and funding of Youth Services in local areas will change over time.

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Capital Project for Schools in Holywood

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education when the capital project for schools in Holywood will commence; and if this is different from the original timescale.

(AQW 4635/10)

Minister of Education: Chuir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt Bhreithmheas Eacnamaíochta (BE) athbhreithnithe ar riachtanais chóiríochta todhchaí Naíscoile agus Bunscoile na Coille Naofa agus Coláiste Comhtháite na Prióireachta faoi bhráid na Roinne i mí na Samhna 2009 agus tá sé á bhreathnú faoi láthair. I ndiaidh a chéile, tá obair ag dul ar aghaidh i dtaca leis an athbhreithniú ar gach tionscadal caipitil a d'fhógair mé ar 15 Deireadh Fómhair 2009, lena chinntiú go bhfuil siad go léir i gcomhréir leis an chreat iomlán beartais atá curtha i bhfeidhm agam le comhionannas a chur chun cinn agus chun dul i ngleic le míbhuntáiste agus go mbeidh siad inbhuanaithe inmharthana san fhadtéarma. Cinnfear toradh an athbhreithnithe an bealach chun tosaigh.

A revised Economic Appraisal (EA) to consider the future accommodation needs of Holywood Nursery and Primary Schools and Priory Integrated College was submitted to the Department by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board in November 2009 and is currently under consideration. In tandem, work is ongoing in relation to the review of all current projects which I announced on 15 October 2009, to ensure that all are consistent with the overall policy framework which I have put in

place to promote equality and tackle disadvantage and will be viable and sustainable in the long term. The outcome of that review will determine the way forward.

Capital Project for Bangor Grammar School

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education what is the timescale for the capital project for Bangor Grammar School; and if this is different from the original timescale.

(AQW 4637/10)

Minister of Education: Nuashonraíodh an Breithmheas Eacnamaíochta agus tá sé á bhreathnú ag an Roinn faoi láthair. D'fhógair mé athbhreithniú ar gach tionscadal caipitil ar 15 Deireadh Fómhair 2009 lena chinntiú go bhfuil siad go léir i gcomhréir leis an chreat iomlán beartais atá curtha i bhfeidhm agam le comhionannas a chur chun cinn agus chun dul i ngleic le mífhuntaíste agus go mbeidh siad inbhuanaithe inmharthana san fhadtéarma. Is é tionscadal le haghaidh Ardscoil Bheannachair ceann de na tionscadail atá á mheas faoi láthair agus is féidir liom a dhearbhu go gcinnfear toradh an athbhreithnithe an bealach chun tosaigh.

The Economic Appraisal has recently been updated and is currently being considered by the Department.

On 15 October 2009 I announced a review of all current projects to ensure that all are consistent with the overall policy framework I have put in place to promote equality and tackle disadvantage and will be viable and sustainable in the long term. The project for Bangor Grammar School is one of those currently being assessed and I can advise that the outcome of the review will determine the way forward.

Capital Projects

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail any delay in her Department's capital projects in the last year.

(AQW 4638/10)

Minister of Education: Faoi Phlean Soláthair Infheistíochta (PSI), tá mo Roinn ag forbairt 108 ollthionscadal caipitil. Go dtí seo cuireadh 24 de na tionscadail seo i gcrích agus tá 16 díobh faoi bhealach faoi láthair. Tá 68 tionscadal eile ag céimeanna éagsúla den phróiseas pleanála agus faofa.

Under the Investment Delivery Plan (IDP) my Department has been taking forward 108 major capital projects. To date 24 of these projects have been completed and 16 are currently on site. The remaining 68 are at various stages of the planning and approval process. There are also other potential projects which will have to be factored into consideration given recent reviews.

The timing of construction of announced projects can be affected by a number of factors including changes over time to the long term viability of a school, planning issues and the availability of capital resources. While the majority of projects have not been taken forward within the timeframe originally envisaged, they have been taken forward when all the necessary appraisal and approval processes have been completed and where funds have been available.

It is necessary to ensure that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place. On 15 October, therefore I announced a review of all capital projects to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term.

This review will ensure that available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for the taxpayer.

SparkleBox Website

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education (i) with whom C2K consulted in determining that the relevant safeguards were in place to allow access to the Sparklebox website to continue; (ii) why this decision was subsequently reversed; and (iii) with whom C2K consulted in reversing this decision.

(AQW 4642/10)

Minister of Education: I have been informed by C2k that it took into consideration the advice from Becta and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) in respect of the safety of the Sparklebox website. C2k's initial view was that:

- the Sparklebox website provided a range of educational content of value to schools and contained no interactive elements that would put children at risk; and
- the C2k network has built-in automatic filtering which disabled any possible interactive component in the site.

C2k continued to monitor the position with schools and colleagues in other educational agencies and, on 1 February, the C2k Management Board decided to block the site following concerns raised by a Belfast primary school. The decision was made on the basis that, although the site carried no risk in terms of the resources it contained, there was a potential risk of causing upset to parents and children given the very serious nature of the offences committed by the former operator of Sparklebox.

D'iarr mé ar Barry Mulholland, Príomhfheidhmeannach de Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair lena iniúchadh cuimsitheach a dhéanamh ar na saincheisteanna a bhaineann le cás Sparklebox chun na fíricí lána a bhunú, agus chun moltaí a dhéanamh ar cad iad na ceachtanna is féidir a fhoghlaim uaithi maidir le polasaithe agus nósanna imeachta um chosaint a fheabhsú agus a fhorbairt.

I have instructed Barry Mulholland, Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board to investigate comprehensively the issues around the Sparklebox case to establish the full facts, and to make recommendations on what lessons can be learned from it in terms of enhancing further policies and procedures for protecting the safety of children.

SparkleBox Website

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail any money spent by her Department to facilitate access to the Sparklebox website.

(AQW 4644/10)

Minister of Education: Ní raibh aon chostais a bhaineann le teacht ar láithreán gréasáin Sparklebox.

No costs were associated with accessing the Sparklebox website.

SparkleBox Website

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education how she learned that an individual found guilty of downloading abusive images of children was running the Sparklebox website.

(AQW 4645/10)

Minister of Education: Ar 28 Eanáir 2010, cuireadh ciontú oibritheoir Sparklebox agus na buarthaí a tháinig as in iúl don Roinn Oideachais trí theagmháil le Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste. Cuireadh in iúl dom an lá ina dhiaidh.

On 28 January 2010, the Department of Education was made aware through contact from the Belfast Education and Library Board of the conviction of the operator of Sparklebox and the concerns that this had raised. I was informed the following day.

As the member will know, I subsequently made a full statement in the Assembly and have initiated an investigation into C2k's handling of the case.

Proposed New Primary School in Islandmagee

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed new primary school in Islandmagee, given that the project was first published by the North Eastern Education and Library Board in 2003 and the fact that a site with planning permission has been purchased.

(AQW 4646/10)

Minister of Education: Chuaigh an Rollú Fad-Téarma don bhunscoil beartaithe nua in Oileán Mhic Aodha i laghad go leibhéal atá go suntasach faoi íosthairseach rollaithe de 105 le haghaidh bunscoile tuaithe inbhuanaithe mar a bhí leagtha amach i mbeartas na Roinne i leith Scoileanna Inbhuanaithe. Mar gheall ar na buarthaí seo maidir le hinbhuanaitheacht, d'iarr m'fheidhmeannaigh ar Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt soláthar a mheas sa cheantar níos leithne agus forbhreathnú straitéiseach a sholáthar don Roinn.

The Long-Term Enrolment for the proposed new primary school in Islandmagee has declined to a level substantially below the minimum enrolment threshold of 105 outlined in the Department's Sustainable School's Policy for a sustainable rural primary school. Given these concerns regarding sustainability, my officials have asked the North Eastern Education and Library Board to consider provision in the wider area and provide the Department with a strategic overview.

Definition of Schools

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education to provide a definition of a (i) voluntary school; (ii) maintained school; and (iii) controlled school.
(AQW 4707/10)

Minister of Education: The legal definitions, as contained in Article 2 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 as amended, are as follows:

- (i) 'voluntary school' means a grant-aided school other than a controlled school or grant-maintained integrated school;
- (ii) 'maintained school' means a voluntary school other than a grammar school or a school which has, under Part II of Schedule 5, ceased to be a maintained school;
- (iii) 'controlled school' means a grant-aided school under the management of a (education & library) board.

Is í an phríomhdhifríocht idir scoileanna deonacha agus scoileanna rialaithe ná go bhfuil scoileanna deonacha (agus scoileanna comhtháite atá faoi chothabháil stáit) faoi uinéireacht phríobháideach agus tá scoileanna rialaithe faoi uinéireacht phoiblí.

The main difference between voluntary and controlled schools is that voluntary schools (and grant maintained integrated schools) are held in private ownership whereas controlled schools are in public ownership.

Governance Status of New Schools

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail how the management or governance status of any new school is determined.
(AQW 4708/10)

Minister of Education: Éilíonn bunú scoile deontas-chúnta nua foilsíú Thogra Forbartha reachtaigh. Chuirfeadh tionscnóirí na scoile molta nua tús leis an phróiseas seo agus tá sé ar na tionscnóirí an cineál scoile a bheartú, ag cur na bhforálacha sna hOrduithe um Oideachas agus Leabharlanna san áireamh.

The establishment of a new grant-aided school requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal. This process would be initiated by the sponsors of the proposed new school and it is for the sponsors to determine the type of school with due regard to the provisions in the Education and Libraries (NI) Orders.

Transport to Schools Funding

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she can confirm that the allocation of funding for transport to (i) secondary schools; and (ii) grammar schools will not be reduced in the coming year.
(AQW 4724/10)

Minister of Education: Tá mé ag meas roghanna ar na coigiltí breise atá riachtanach ón bhuiséad oideachais a dhéanamh faoi láthair. Is substaintiúil atá scála na gcoigiltí le déanamh agus beidh sé deacair iad a sholáthar ar bhealach a n-íoslaghdóidh an tionchar a bheidh acu ar sheirbhísí túslíne. Maidir leis an chomhionannas, déanfaidh m'fheidhmeannaigh measúnú comhionannais ar gach ceann de na tograí agus ní dhéanfar aon chinneadh go dtí go gcríochnófar an próiseas seo.

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 as far as possible, the impact on front line services. 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.

Capital Build Programme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to list the capital building projects which have been completed, those currently underway and those which are at the planning stage since May 2007. **(AQW 4831/10)**

Minister of Education: Tá 39 mórthionscadal caipitiúil scoile curtha i gcrích ó mhí Bealtaine 2007, ar infheistíocht de bhreis agus £253m san eastát scoile é. Is iad na tionscadail a críochnaíodh ó mhí Bealtaine 2007 ná:-

Since May 2007, 39 major capital school projects have been completed representing an investment of over £253m in our schools estate. The projects completed since May 2007 are:

School Name	Capital Cost £M
Abbey G.S. Newry	16.2
Ashfield Girls H.S. Belfast	23.4
Ballinderry P.S.	2.6
Ballyholme P.S. Bangor	3.8
Ballymacrickett P.S. Crumlin	2.9
Ballymena Maintained Primary Schools	5.0
Bangor Academy	23.8
Brookefield Special School, Moira	5.2
Camphill P.S. Ballymena	2.9
Cedar Lodge Special School, Belfast	4.7
Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh	11.1
Drumrane P.S. Dungiven	1.0
Enniskillen Integrated P.S.	2.4
Fivemiletown H.S.	9.6
Fourtowns P.S. Ahoghill	2.2
Glendhu Nursery School, Belfast	0.6
Holy Cross College, Strabane	31.3
Killen P.S. Castlederg	1.1
Kircubbin Nursery School	0.3

School Name	Capital Cost £M
La Salle Boys School, Belfast	13.5
Lisneal College, Derry	14.2
Maralin P.S. Craigavon	2.2
Moorfields P.S. Ballymena	2.1
Mossley P.S. Newtownabbey	4.2
Mount Lourdes G.S. Enniskillen	4.0
Nendrum College, Comber	10.9
Orangefield P.S. Belfast	7.0
Pond Park P.S. Lisburn	4.9
Ravenscroft Nursery School, Belfast	0.9
Saintfield H.S.	3.4
St Catherine's College, Armagh	0.5
St Colman's College, Newry	11.1
St Patrick's College, Dungannon	9.7
St Patrick's P.S. Saul	1.5
St Peter's P.S. Cloughreagh	3.2
Templepatrick P.S.	3.9
Towerview P.S. Bangor	3.6
Victoria P.S. Ballyhalbert	1.5
Waringstown P.S.	1.4

A further 16 major capital school projects are currently on site representing a further investment of over £252m. These are as follows:

School Name	Capital Cost £M
Assumption G.S. Ballynahinch	13.7
Banbridge Academy	17.9
Belfast Model School For Boys	32.7
Belfast Model School For Girls	30.9
Grosvenor G.S.	27.8
Lisbellaw P.S.	2.3
Lisnagelvin P.S. Derry	5.5
Magherafelt H.S.	10.5
Our Lady & St Patrick's College Knock	23.0
St Cecilia's College, Derry	19.8
St Dominic's H.S. Belfast	18.5

School Name	Capital Cost £M
St Joseph's P.S. Carryduff	5.8
St Mary's College Derry	19.8
St Mary's P.S. Portglenone	3.9
St Patrick's G.S. Downpatrick	16.8
St Patrick's & St Brigid's P.S. Ballycastle	3.9

In addition, the following 69 major capital school projects are currently at various stages on the planning process:

School Name	Project Details
Artigarvan P.S. Strabane	New school on existing site
Arvalee / Cranny Special School Omagh	New school on existing site
Ballykelly P.S. Limavady	New school on existing site
Ballymoney HS	New school on existing site
Bangor G.S.	New school on new site
Belmont Special School Derry	New school on existing site
Carrick P.S. Warrenpoint	New school on existing extended site
Coláiste Feirste, Belfast	Extension & Refurbishment
Coranny & Cornagague P.S. Roslea	New school on new site
Dean Maguirc College Carrickmore	New school on new site
Devenish College Enniskillen	New school on new site
Dromintee P.S. Killeavey	New school on existing extended site
Dromore Central P.S.	New school on new site
Ebrington P.S. Derry	New school on existing site
Edenderry N.S./Glenwood P.S. Belfast	New school on new site
Edendork P.S. Dungannon	New school on new site
Eglinton P.S. Derry	New school on existing site
Enniskillen Model P.S.	New school on existing site
Foyle & Londonderry College	New school on new site
Glastry College Ballyhalbert	New school on existing extended site
Greenwood Assessment Centre Belfast	New school on existing site
Holy Family P.S. Magherafelt	New school on existing extended site
Holy Trinity College Cookstown	New school on existing site
Hollywood P.S.	New school on new site
Knockbreda H.S. Belfast	New school on existing site
Knockevin Special School Downpatrick	New school on existing site

School Name	Project Details
Lagan College Belfast (PPP)	Extension & Refurbishment
Limegrove / Glasvey Special School Limavady	New school on existing site
Little Flower Girls S.S. Belfast	New school on existing site
Loreto Grammar Omagh	New school on existing site
Lurgan College	New school on existing site
Magherafelt P.S.	New school on new site
Methodist College Belfast	Extension & Refurbishment
Mitchell House Special School Belfast	New school on existing site
New Buildings P.S. – Derry	New school on existing site
Omagh I.P.S.	New school on new site
Parkhall College Antrim	New school on existing site
Portadown College	New school on existing site
Priory College Holywood	New school on new site
Rainey Endowed School Magherafelt	New school on existing site
Scoil Na Fuisseoige Belfast	New school on existing site
Springhill P.S. Belfast	New school on existing site
St Bronagh's P.S. Rostrevor	New school on existing site
St Clare's Abbey P.S. Newry	New school on new site
St Colman's P.S. Lambeg	New school on existing site
St Columba's P.S. Straw	New school on new site
St Columbanus College Bangor	New school on existing site
St Columbkille's P.S. Carrickmore	New school on existing site
St Conor's P.S. Omagh	New school on existing site
St Joseph's Convent P.S. Newry	New school on existing site
St Joseph's P.S. Madden	New school on existing site
St Louis G.S. Kilkeel	New school on existing site
St Mary's PS Banbridge.	New school on existing site
St Mary's P.S. Newcastle	New school on existing site
St Oliver Plunkett P.S. Forkhill	New school on new site
St Patrick's Academy Dungannon	New school on existing site
St Patrick's College Banbridge	New school on existing site
St Patrick's G.S. Armagh	Extension & Refurbishment
St Paul's P.S. Irvinestown	New school on existing site
St Teresa's P.S. Lurgan	New school on existing extended site

School Name	Project Details
Strand / Sydenham PS. Belfast	New school on existing site
Strandtown PS. Belfast	New school on existing site
Strathearn G.S. Belfast	New school on existing site
Tannaghmore P.S. Lurgan	New school on existing site
Taughmonagh PS Belfast	New school on existing site
The High School Ballynahinch	New school on existing site
Tor Bank Special Belfast (PPP)	New school on existing site
Victoria College Belfast	Extension & Refurbishment
Whitehouse PS Newtownabbey	New school on existing site

It is necessary to ensure that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place. On 15 October 2009, therefore I announced a review of all capital projects to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term.

This review will ensure that available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for the taxpayer.

Department for Employment and Learning

People Aged 60 and Above Currently in a Further Education Course

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people aged 60 and above are currently registered in a Further Education course; and for the equivalent figure in each of the last five years. **(AQW 4393/10)**

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The table below details the number of enrolments aged 60 and above registered in a Further Education course in 2008/09 and in each of the previous five years.

Academic year	Professional/Technical Enrolments	Non Professional/Technical Enrolments	Total
2003/04	5,427	21,288	26,715
2004/05	6,563	21,741	28,304
2005/06	6,300	20,704	27,004
2006/07	6,366	17,049	23,415
2007/08	5,327	11,515	16,842
2008/09	4,942	9,537	14,479

Source: Further Education Statistical Record.

Note: Non Professional/Technical enrolments relate to hobby and leisure courses, which are non-accredited.

Preventative and Early Intervention Measures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an estimate of the percentage of his annual budget which is directed towards preventative and early intervention measures.

(AQW 4422/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The answer to this question is very much dependant on the definition of “preventative and early intervention measures”. The Department’s annual budget for 2009/10 is broken down as follows:

- Employment and Skills(including Further Education) - £355m;
- Higher Education - £244m;
- Student Support - £175m;
- Corporate Services and Employment Rights and European Social Fund - £42m;

Of these, I would suggest that, Employment and Skills (including Further Education) and Higher Education are deemed as preventative and early intervention measures, as the activities of these programmes are either designed to address barriers to employment or , through learning and skills acquisition, to improve peoples life chances for the future thereby contributing to economic development This equates to 73.4% of my total budget.

Number of Students in Further and Higher Education

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many (i) full-time students; and (ii) part-time students attended each Further and Higher Education college, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4498/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The tables below detail the number of Full time and Part time Enrolments at each of the Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges from 2004/05 to 2008/09.

(I) FULL TIME PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	8,145	9,189	7,953	6,548	6,025
Northern Regional College	5,112	4,633	4,879	4,694	4,554
South Eastern Regional College	5,053	5,198	5,020	4,854	4,215
Southern Regional College	5,107	5,086	5,089	5,185	4,783
South West College	3,438	3,876	3,863	3,763	3,418
North West Regional College	4,174	5,162	4,862	4,169	4,279
Total	31,029	33,144	31,666	29,213	27,274

(II) PART TIME PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	27,733	32,129	36,289	31,498	31,569
Northern Regional College	15,605	17,240	18,589	16,395	15,268
South Eastern Regional College	18,428	16,483	19,254	16,906	19,250
Southern Regional College	21,888	20,273	20,424	22,024	22,526

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
South West College	16,221	13,831	12,624	13,241	13,730
North West Regional College	17,420	15,089	12,440	12,823	12,869
Total	117,295	115,045	119,620	112,887	115,212

(II) NON PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS (ALL-PART TIME)

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	16,413	18,799	16,098	11,050	12,559
Northern Regional College	12,088	10,579	8,681	6,324	3,769
South Eastern Regional College	7,654	6,450	5,016	4,252	3,241
Southern Regional College	15,353	14,612	9,704	5,903	5,235
South West College	16,837	16,598	9,640	6,033	5,278
North West Regional College	6,343	6,888	6,318	4,450	4,214
Total	74,688	73,926	55,457	38,012	34,296

Source: Further Education Statistical Record.

Note: Non Professional/Technical enrolments relate to hobby and leisure courses, which are non-accredited.

Essential Skills Courses

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students undertook Essential Skills courses in (i) literacy; (ii) numeracy; and (iii) I.T skills in each Further and Higher Education college, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4499/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of students who undertook an Essential Skills course in (i) literacy; (ii) numeracy; and (iii) ICT, in each of the Further and Higher Education colleges, in each of the last five years, is detailed in the tables below. ICT was introduced as an Essential Skills course in 2009/10. Previously it had been piloted in the three previous academic years in a limited number of training providers.

I) LITERACY

Academic Year ¹	Regional College					
	Belfast Metropolitan College	Northern Regional College	North West Regional College	South Eastern Regional College	Southern Regional College	South West Regional College
2004/05	546	794	497	401	603	527
2005/06	760	891	579	929	1,027	485
2006/07 ²	824	740	655	855	825	588
2007/08	959	977	814	815	966	670
2008/09	1,222	1,425	1,107	1,547	1,408	998

Source: Essential Skills Enrolment Return.

II) NUMERACY

Academic Year ¹	Regional College					
	Belfast Metropolitan College	Northern Regional College	North West Regional College	South Eastern Regional College	Southern Regional College	South West Regional College
2004/05	277	456	285	157	298	307
2005/06	682	799	483	772	580	352
2006/07 ²	803	714	553	994	634	584
2007/08	1,018	1,071	696	994	950	744
2008/09	1,306	1,477	1,027	1,537	1,184	1,067

Source: Essential Skills Enrolment Return.

III) INFORMATION COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

Academic Year ¹	Regional College					
	Belfast Metropolitan College	Northern Regional College	North West Regional College	South Eastern Regional College	Southern Regional College	South West Regional College
2006/07 ²	15	56	35	29	25	32
2007/08	103	28	29	70	70	54
2008/09	290	121	101	300	20	0

Source: Essential Skills Enrolment Return.

Notes:

Figures are correct as at 5th March 2009.

- Academic year is defined as 1st August to 31st July.
- Please note the previous 16 Further and Higher Education Colleges merged together into six Regional Colleges in 2006/07.

Number of Enrolments in Further and Higher Education

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the growth in the number of (i) level 2 enrolments; and (ii) level 3 enrolments in each Further and Higher Education college, in the last ten years. **(AQW 4502/10)**

Minister for Employment and Learning: The table below details the number of enrolments on Level 2 and Level 3 courses in each Further and Higher Education college in 1999/00 and 2008/09.

College	Level 2		Level 3	
	1999/00	2008/09	1999/00	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	9,211	8,639	7,663	10,999
Northern Regional College	4,697	8,071	5,940	5,603

College	Level 2		Level 3	
	1999/00	2008/09	1999/00	2008/09
South Eastern Regional College	5,791	9,850	4,391	5,609
Southern Regional College	4,101	13,899	5,495	7,246
South West College	3,674	6,905	3,620	4,225
North West Regional College	5,876	4,778	5,452	4,392
Total	33,350	52,142	32,561	38,074

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

Number of Students in Further and Higher Education

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time students who studied higher education courses in each Further and Higher Education college, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4504/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The tables below detail the number of Full time and Part time Enrolments who studied Higher Education courses at each of the Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges from 2004/05 to 2008/09.

(I) FULL TIME ENROLMENTS

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	1,703	1,761	1,734	1,613	1,576
Northern Regional College	163	210	276	223	213
South Eastern Regional College	556	573	572	603	553
Southern Regional College	377	401	453	503	488
South West College	143	124	109	169	230
North West Regional College	563	921	772	764	788
Total	3,505	3,990	3,916	3,875	3,848

(II) PART TIME ENROLMENTS

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	2,998	3,483	3,111	2,554	2,474
Northern Regional College	1,043	1,072	907	814	787
South Eastern Regional College	1,087	979	734	654	635
Southern Regional College	1,389	1,228	1,402	1,198	1,184
South West College	1,018	1,068	830	623	825
North West Regional College	958	972	725	525	528
Total	8,493	8,802	7,709	6,368	6,433

Source: Further Education Statistical Record.

Number of Students in Further and Higher Education

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students aged (i) 14-16; and (ii) 17-19 in each Further and Higher Education college, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 4505/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The tables below detail the number of enrolments aged 14-16 and 17-19 in each Northern Ireland Further Education college in each of the last five years.

(I) 14-16 PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	3,737	4,294	5,299	5,250	5,055
Northern Regional College	4,874	5,358	6,048	6,164	6,343
South Eastern Regional College	3,628	3,648	5,347	5,445	5,787
Southern Regional College	7,253	7,155	6,683	8,579	8,854
South West College	3,012	3,505	3,781	4,312	4,624
North West Regional College	3,989	3,226	2,963	3,510	3,321
Total	26,493	27,186	30,121	33,260	33,984

14-16 Non Professional/Technical Enrolments

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	308	629	324	56	186
Northern Regional College	359	186	121	169	177
South Eastern Regional College	718	958	135	439	177
Southern Regional College	973	748	338	614	454
South West College	740	478	233	157	78
North West Regional College	312	317	131	102	177
Total	3,410	3,316	1,282	1,537	1,249

(II) 17-19 PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	8,254	10,355	10,450	9,225	9,683
Northern Regional College	5,340	5,714	5,994	5,896	5,428
South Eastern Regional College	5,400	5,454	6,226	6,110	6,449
Southern Regional College	6,117	6,172	6,063	6,337	6,461
South West College	4,057	4,163	4,298	4,729	4,913
North West Regional College	5,136	4,835	4,310	3,731	4,076
Total	34,304	36,693	37,341	36,028	37,010

17-19 NON PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS

College	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast Metropolitan College	398	1,045	935	193	492
Northern Regional College	545	333	281	235	177
South Eastern Regional College	311	260	195	414	399
Southern Regional College	731	781	551	520	536
South West College	694	621	468	245	215
North West Regional College	306	352	186	148	212
Total	2,985	3,392	2,616	1,755	2,031

Note: Non Professional/Technical enrolments relate to hobby and leisure courses, which are non-accredited

Unemployment in the Kilcooley Estate

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his Department doing to reduce unemployment in the Kilcooley Estate in Bangor.

(AQW 4549/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: A comprehensive range of services is available through Bangor JobCentre and through contracted providers to help the unemployed including those in Kilcooley find work. These services include 'Steps to Work,' a flexible, menu-based, modular approach to provision, better tailored to the individual's needs, with a clear emphasis on increasing the participants' employability prospects. The Pathways to Work programme is open to clients with health conditions or disabilities and there is a range of provision available through the Department's Disablement Advisory Service to help people with specific disabilities. In addition, Progress2Work (NI) is specifically targeted at ex-prisoners, those who are homeless and those with substance misuse/abuse issues will run until March 2010. The Department's Careers Service provides an all age Careers Information, Advice and Guidance service to adults and young people. These services can be accessed through our specially trained Personal Adviser Service based in the local Jobcentre at 65 High Street Bangor BT20 5BE.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment**New Start-up Businesses**

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of new start-up businesses which began trading with Invest NI support in each of the last five years; (ii) the number of these businesses which (a) continue to trade; and (b) ceased trading; and (iv) the number of these businesses which ceased trading after (a) one year; (b) two years; (c) three years; (d) four years; and (e) five years.

(AQW 4415/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): During the period 2004/05 to 2008/09, 397 new locally-owned businesses began trading with assistance offered directly by Invest NI. Table 1 shows (i) the number of business offered assistance in each of these five years, (ii) a. the number that continue to trade and (ii) b. the number that have ceased trading after (iii) (a) one year; (b) two years; (c) three years; (d) four years; and (e) five years.

TABLE 1. BUSINESSES WHICH BEGAN TRADING WITH INVEST NI SUPPORT & ASSOCIATED SURVIVAL RATES (2004/05 - 2008/09)

Year Of Offer	Number of Businesses	Number Of Businesses Ceased Trading					
		After 1 Year	After 2 Year	After 3 Year	After 4 Year	After 5 Year	Total
2004/05	57	3	4		3	1	11
2005/06	31	1		1	1		3
2006/07	69	5	1	1	1		8
2007/08	117	2	4	4			10
2008/09	123	1	5		2		8
Total	397	12	14	6	7	1	40

In addition, during the same period Invest NI also indirectly offered support to some 15,844 new business starts through the Enterprise Development Programme (formerly the Start a Business programme), delivered in conjunction with Enterprise Northern Ireland. An independent evaluation of the programme found that 87% of these new businesses were still trading after a 4 year period, which equates to approximately 13,800 businesses. This information compares favourably with an average UK 3 year survival rate for VAT registered business of 70%.

Economically Inactive People

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of economically inactive people in each council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4589/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Estimates of economic inactivity at district council level are sourced to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) local area database and the latest figures currently available relate to 2008. The table below contains estimates of the number of economically inactive people aged 16 and over in each district council area between 2006 and 2008.

ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE¹ (AGED 16+) BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA, 2006-2008

District Council Area	2006	2007	2008
Antrim	13,000	16,000	12,000
Ards	25,000	25,000	27,000
Armagh	14,000	16,000	19,000
Ballymena	18,000	19,000	18,000
Ballymoney	8,000	11,000	9,000
Banbridge	15,000	15,000	12,000
Belfast	95,000	96,000	91,000
Carrickfergus	10,000	11,000	14,000
Castlereagh	17,000	17,000	19,000
Coleraine	18,000	16,000	19,000
Cookstown	11,000	9,000	14,000

District Council Area	2006	2007	2008
Craigavon	26,000	24,000	25,000
Derry	33,000	34,000	40,000
Down	20,000	20,000	17,000
Dungannon	17,000	14,000	16,000
Fermanagh	22,000	20,000	21,000
Larne	9,000	11,000	12,000
Limavady	12,000	12,000	14,000
Lisburn	34,000	27,000	31,000
Magherafelt	11,000	11,000	10,000
Moyle	6,000	6,000	5,000
Newry and Mourne	26,000	26,000	28,000
Newtownabbey	22,000	22,000	26,000
North Down	28,000	25,000	24,000
Omagh	14,000	16,000	18,000
Strabane	14,000	15,000	12,000
Northern Ireland	539,000	536,000	553,000

- 1 The economically inactive are those people who are neither in employment nor unemployed. This group includes, for example, all those who are looking after the family/home, retired, sick/disabled or in full-time education etc.

The LFS is a sample survey and estimates from it have an associated degree of sampling error. In particular, estimates at district council level are based on relatively small sample sizes and are subject to a higher degree of sampling variability. The vast majority of the year on year changes shown in the table are not statistically significant. Any conclusion drawn from these estimates should therefore be treated with caution.

Orange Museums

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the potential tourism opportunity of the proposed Orange museums planned in Belfast and Loughgall.
(AQW 4616/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) research highlights that visiting museums is a key activity enjoyed by tourists to Northern Ireland. The new Ulster Museum has recorded excellent visitor numbers within the first few months of opening with 100,000 in the first month alone.

NITB cannot accurately assess the tourism potential of the proposed Orange museums but know that visitors are curious to know more about our heritage. Providing the collections have real historical interest and are presented in a professional and balanced way they ought to be able to attract visitors.

However, to be successful in tourism terms it is not just the historical content that is important. Equal emphasis needs to be placed on the visitor experience, in particular:

- opening times appropriate for visitors;
- new technology and innovative interpretation;

- good access in terms of transport;
- visitor facilities such as café and shop; and specific to this project,
- links with other historical sites as promoted in the Williamite Trail.

Invest Northern Ireland

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if Invest NI has a strategic policy for renewable energy.

(AQW 4621/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I issued last year a consultation paper to assist me in developing a revised strategic energy policy and, in that document, I stated that my vision was for a more sustainable energy system. I also proposed a new strategic goal to increase the amount of electricity from renewable sources to 40% by 2010. I am currently reviewing responses to the consultation and intend to issue a revised Strategic Energy Framework before the summer.

Invest NI continues to identify business opportunities in the renewable energy sector and build awareness of these within local industry.

Offshore Renewable Energy

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many inquiries there have been from renewable energy companies regarding plans for their roles in offshore renewable energy.

(AQW 4713/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the preparation of the Draft Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan 2009-2020 and the associated Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), which are currently the subject of a public consultation, DETI received 12 inquiries from organisations interested in developing the potentially significant offshore wind and tidal resources in Northern Ireland waters. In all cases, DETI noted that the completion of the SEA and finalisation of the Plan would enable DETI to work with The Crown Estate, as owner of the seabed, to launch a competitive call for offshore renewable energy projects. This call is planned for 2010-2011 and will enable developers to come forward with their specific proposals.

Offshore Renewable Energy Forum

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the membership of the Offshore Renewable Energy Forum and whether it will include any representatives of the fishing industry.

(AQW 4714/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The establishment of an Offshore Renewable Energy Forum is a recommendation from the Strategic Environmental Assessment of DETI's draft Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan 2009-2020. The Forum has not yet been established. It is essential that we work with others operating within the marine environment as we take forward the Action Plan. The public consultation on the draft Plan ends on 8 March and I look forward to comments from other marine users, including the fishing industry, on both the Plan and also in relation to the membership of the Forum.

Offshore Renewable Energy Certificate

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the criteria applied in relation to the Offshore Renewable Energy Certificate.

(AQW 4715/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The main support mechanism for the production of renewable electricity is the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) which operates in tandem with similar mechanisms across the UK. It places an obligation on electricity suppliers to account for

a specified and increasing proportion of their electricity from renewable sources. Evidence is by way of Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) which are issued to the generators of renewable electricity and have a monetary value and are traded on a UK wide basis.

While DETI currently has the legislative power to issue onshore ROCs, the powers to issue offshore ROCs currently lie with the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC). Within my Department's draft Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan 2009-2020, which is the subject of a public consultation until 8 March 2010, we have set out that we will be seeking, within the overall devolved settlement, to transfer these powers from DECC to DETI.

Broadband for Rural Areas

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what plans her Department has, including a timescale, for the provision of Broadband for rural areas in Mid-Tyrone. (AQW 4717/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Broadband has been available across all of Northern Ireland, including Mid-Tyrone, from December 2005 when work was completed under my Department's 2004 contract with BT for the delivery of 100% access in Northern Ireland to a service of not less than 512Kbps. Services are delivered through fixed wire line and satellite technologies.

More recently I announced completion of one of the fixed wireless projects supported under the Northern Ireland Broadband Fund. The company delivering the project, North West Electronics, is already offering services across Mid-Tyrone and the West generally, providing further choice for residential and business customers seeking a broadband solution. These services range from a 2Mbps service to a state of the art 100Mbps business service.

On 3 December 2009 I also announced the £48m 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 3331/10 published in the weekly answer book dated 18 December 2009. More detailed information on the rollout programme will be available on the website www.fasterbroadbandni.com which is planned to be available from end-February 2010.

Unemployed People with Disabilities

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what percentage of people with disabilities are unemployed and how this compares to the rest of the population. (AQO 813/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Labour Force Survey estimates for the economic status of working age persons in Northern Ireland with and without a disability are shown in the table below.

ECONOMIC STATUS OF WORKING AGE¹ PERSONS WITH / WITHOUT A DISABILITY², QUARTER 3 2009

Economic Status	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
In employment	31%	75%
Unemployed ³	5%	5%
Economically Inactive ⁴	64%	19%
All Persons ⁵	100%	100%

1 Working Age refers to females aged 16-59 and males aged 16 to 64.

2 Figures relate to current long-term disabilities that are covered by the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and/or work-limiting disabilities.

- 3 These figures are not the same as the unemployment rates for persons with and without a disability, which are 14.0% and 6.7% respectively. The unemployment rate is the percentage of the economically active (i.e. the employed plus the unemployed) who are unemployed.
- 4 The economically inactive are those people who are neither in employment nor unemployed. This group includes, for example, all those who are looking after the family/home, retired, sick/disabled or in full-time education etc.
- 5 Figures may not sum due to rounding.

Source: NI Labour Force Survey, Quarter 3 2009

Department of the Environment

EU Nitrates Directive

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment whether the poultry industry is failing to comply with the environmental legislation, set out in the EU Nitrates Directive on 31 December 2008; and if so, what enforcement action his Department has taken.

(AQW 4360/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): The introduction of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (NAP Regulations) on 1 January 2007 met Northern Ireland's obligations under the Nitrates Directive.

The NAP Regulations allow the application of poultry litter to land, as a fertiliser, within the 170 kg nitrogen/hectare/year livestock manure limit. However, land spreading of this material at this level is not sustainable in the long term due to its high phosphorus content, the enriched phosphorus status of local soils and the resultant impact of excess phosphorus on water quality.

It therefore became evident during the development of the NAP Regulations that off-farm solutions as an alternative to land spreading needed to be advanced in the longer term. A proposal, by the poultry sector, to progress a technical alternative to land spreading, helped persuade the European Commission to allow a temporary measure in the NAP Regulations for the storage of poultry litter in field heaps until 31 December 2008.

As progress was not made with an off-farm solution for poultry litter on the timescale originally envisaged, agreement was sought and secured from the European Commission to extend the temporary storage measure in the Regulations up to 31 December 2010.

In 2010, the Action Programme, including the measures for storage and application of poultry litter, must be reviewed and a revised Action Programme put in place for the period 2011-2014. DOE and DARD officials are currently actively engaged with the European Commission in this review. In parallel, DOE and DARD are meeting with local stakeholders. A formal consultation will be carried during 2010 on any proposed revisions to the NAP Regulations.

In the absence of evidence of progress to implement an alternative to land spreading of poultry litter, the Commission may seek further measures to control phosphorus. The Departments will be continuing to engage with poultry industry representatives during the review process to identify options for the disposal of poultry litter from 1 January 2011.

Individual farmers are responsible for compliance with the NAP Regulations, of which storage is only one element. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is the responsible body for inspection and enforcement. In all cases of non-compliance appropriate action is taken in accordance with the NIEA Enforcement Policy. Non-compliance is also reported to DARD, under Cross Compliance, which may result in penalties against farmers' direct aid payments.

EU Nitrates Directive

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment whether EU Commissioners are aware that the Northern Ireland poultry industry is failing to comply with the EU Nitrates Directive; and if so, when he expects infraction proceedings for breach of environmental legislation to begin.

(AQW 4361/10)

Minister of the Environment: The introduction of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (NAP Regulations) on 1 January 2007 met Northern Ireland's obligations under the Nitrates Directive.

The NAP Regulations allow the application of poultry litter to land, as a fertiliser, within the 170 kg nitrogen/hectare/year livestock manure limit. However, land spreading of this material at this level is not sustainable in the long term due to its high phosphorus content, the enriched phosphorus status of local soils and the resultant impact of excess phosphorus on water quality.

It therefore became evident during the development of the NAP Regulations that off-farm solutions as an alternative to land spreading needed to be advanced in the longer term. A proposal, by the poultry sector, to progress a technical alternative to land spreading, helped persuade the European Commission to allow a temporary measure in the NAP Regulations for the storage of poultry litter in field heaps until 31 December 2008.

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Individual farmers are responsible for compliance with the NAP Regulations, of which storage is only one element. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is the responsible body for inspection and enforcement. In all cases of non-compliance appropriate action is taken in accordance with the NIEA Enforcement Policy. Non-compliance is also reported to DARD, under Cross Compliance, which may result in penalties against farmers' direct aid payments.

EU Nitrates Directive

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's strategy, from January 2010 to January 2013, to ensure the Poultry Industry's compliance with the environmental legislative requirements of the EU Nitrates Directive.

(AQW 4363/10)

Minister of the Environment: The introduction of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (NAP Regulations) on 1 January 2007 met Northern Ireland's obligations under the Nitrates Directive.

The NAP Regulations allow the application of poultry litter to land, as a fertiliser, within the 170 kg nitrogen/hectare/year livestock manure limit. However, land spreading of this material at this level is not sustainable in the long term due to its high phosphorus content, the enriched phosphorus status of local soils and the resultant impact of excess phosphorus on water quality.

It therefore became evident during the development of the NAP Regulations that off-farm solutions as an alternative to land spreading needed to be advanced in the longer term. A proposal, by the poultry sector, to progress a technical alternative to land spreading, helped persuade the European Commission to allow a temporary measure in the NAP Regulations for the storage of poultry litter in field heaps until 31 December 2008.

As progress was not made with an off-farm solution for poultry litter on the timescale originally envisaged, agreement was sought and secured from the European Commission to extend the temporary storage measure in the Regulations up to 31 December 2010.

In 2010, the Action Programme, including the measures for storage and application of poultry litter, must be reviewed and a revised Action Programme put in place for the period 2011-2014. DOE and DARD officials are currently actively engaged with the European Commission in this review. In parallel, DOE and DARD are meeting with local stakeholders. A formal consultation will be carried during 2010 on any proposed revisions to the NAP Regulations.

In the absence of evidence of progress to implement an alternative to land spreading of poultry litter, the Commission may seek further measures to control phosphorus. The Departments will be continuing to engage with poultry industry representatives during the review process to identify options for the disposal of poultry litter from 1 January 2011.

Individual farmers are responsible for compliance with the NAP Regulations, of which storage is only one element. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is the responsible body for inspection and enforcement. In all cases of non-compliance appropriate action is taken in accordance with the NIEA Enforcement Policy. Non-compliance is also reported to DARD, under Cross Compliance, which may result in penalties against farmers' direct aid payments.

Walled City Signature Project

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment if the proposed meeting has taken place between his Department and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to discuss the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's Walled City signature project, and if so, what was the outcome.

(AQW 4398/10)

Minister of the Environment: I can advise that meetings to discuss options for two schemes which form part of the Walled City Signature Project took place on 26 January 2010. I can also clarify that the Signature Project is an initiative of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) rather than the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

My officials are continuing to seek a resolution to overcome the issues raised from this meeting.

Derelict Buildings in Towns and Villages

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's remit or powers, including building control within local government, to enforce the safety and appearance of derelict buildings in towns and villages; and to provide examples of enforcement undertaken by his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4420/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department does not have any powers to enforce the safety and appearance of derelict buildings and, consequently, has taken no such action. District councils have powers under Articles 65 and 66 of the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 to deal with defective premises that are in such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance, and to deal with ruinous and dilapidated buildings and neglected sites that are seriously detrimental to the amenities of a neighbourhood. However, my Department does not hold information on the extent to which these powers have been exercised by district councils in each of the last five years.

The Department of Finance and Personnel, which has policy responsibility for the building control functions of district councils, has advised that building control legislation does not provide powers in relation to dangerous or derelict buildings and, therefore, no enforcement procedures are available.

My colleague, Margaret Ritchie, MLA, the Minister for Social Development, has advised that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has powers under Article 63 of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 which give it the authority to secure or demolish premises in order to either prevent damage or to protect housing accommodation and to recover costs from the owner, where appropriate.

In addition my colleague, Conor Murphy, MP, MLA, the Minister for Regional Development, has advised that as the majority of buildings are located adjacent to public roads, it is the responsibility of property owners, or occupiers of those lands, to ensure that such buildings do not endanger or obstruct road users.

Buildings that may endanger or obstruct road users are usually identified by Roads Service during routine maintenance inspections. Although members of the general public, or public representatives, would also, from time to time, report suspect buildings to a local Roads Service Section Office. In most cases, these reports are forwarded to the local council's Building Control office, for attention.

Roads Service may also, in some cases, try to identify the owners/occupiers of the building, and seek their co-operation in removing the danger, which may include the erection of temporary signing and fencing. Should this course of action fail, Roads Service has powers, under Article 51 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, to serve notice on the owner/occupier, requiring him to carry out such works so as to remove the hazard, if in their opinion they consider the building, wall or other structure is in such a condition that it could present a danger to road users.

Where an owner/occupier does not comply with the requirements of the notice, or cannot be identified, Roads Service may carry out the necessary remedial works to ensure the safety of road users and will seek to recover the costs, where possible.

Damage to Vehicles: Claims Made Against Local Councils

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many claims were made against local councils for damage to vehicles in each of the last five years, broken down by council area; and (ii) to provide a summary of the reasons for the claims.

(AQW 4475/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of claims made against local councils for damage to vehicles in each of the last five financial years is provided in the table below. The main reasons for the claims may be categorised as driver error or "alleged" negligence by council employees.

AQW 4475-10 NUMBER OF CLAIMS MADE BY COUNCIL AREA, FOR DAMAGE TO VEHICLES OVER LAST 5 FINANCIAL YEARS.

Council	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Antrim	3	7	5	3	3
Ards*	28	21	40	44	6
Armagh	3	3	1	1	1
Ballymena	3	32	21	24	16
Ballymoney	0	2	1	3	3
Banbridge	5	7	6	3	7
Belfast	167	105	84	61	64
Carrickfergus	4	6	3	8	6
Castlereagh	3	10	17	21	10

Council	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Coleraine	4	4	6	3	5
Cookstown	2	4	1	1	1
Craigavon	16	7	20	17	19
Derry	29	32	27	22	26
Down	0	4	5	5	15
Dungannon & S Tyrone*	3	7	10	7	14
Fermanagh	0	6	4	3	5
Larne	1	8	5	4	0
Limavady	1	3	2	3	1
Lisburn*	7	7	6	11	6
Magherafelt	2	2	4	4	5
Moyle	2	0	5	1	1
Newry & Mourne	21	26	23	29	31
Newtownabbey	11	3	10	15	15
North Down	10	10	17	8	8
Omagh	3	5	10	0	3
Strabane	5	1	3	0	1
Total	333	322	336	301	272

* Calendar years

Personal Injuries: Claims Made Against Local Councils

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many claims were made against local councils for personal injuries in each of the last five years, broken down by council area; and (ii) to provide a summary of the reasons for the claims.

(AQW 4477/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of claims made against councils for personal injuries in each of the last five financial years is detailed in the table below. The vast majority of claims resulted from various types of falls, slips or trips on council property.

AQW4477-10 NUMBER OF PERSONAL CLAIMS MADE AGAINST COUNCILS OVER LAST FIVE FINANCIAL YEARS.

Council	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Antrim*	4	5	10	8	8
Ards	18	20	24	22	14
Armagh	8	16	10	7	6
Ballymena	3	7	5	11	10
Ballymoney	0	2	1	3	4

Council	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Banbridge	1	4	5	3	2
Belfast	243	217	213	150	178
Carrickfergus*	12	17	23	10	12
Castlereagh*	3	14	21	15	18
Coleraine	8	7	8	6	6
Cookstown	5	6	6	6	4
Craigavon*	45	34	24	31	23
Derry	35	32	26	23	22
Down	1	11	17	29	30
Dungannon & S Tyrone	3	7	10	7	13
Fermanagh	3	5	12	4	11
Larne	13	10	5	4	5
Limavady	3	6	3	3	1
Lisburn	20	14	15	14	26
Magherafelt	0	1	1	3	2
Moyle	2	5	9	4	4
Newry & Mourne	17	13	23	18	19
Newtownabbey	47	26	33	33	34
North Down	26	25	18	10	11
Omagh	4	7	5	5	7
Strabane	5	5	4	1	4
Total	529	516	531	430	474

*Calendar year

Community Safety Grants

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of how community safety grants are distributed by local councils.

(AQW 4513/10)

Minister of the Environment: It would not be appropriate for me to comment on a funding scheme, the conditions of which have been set by Northern Ireland Office (NIO).

Grievances by Local Council Staff

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of staff grievances brought by local council staff against their employer in each of the last five years; (ii) the number of these grievances which (a) were upheld; (b) were dismissed; and (c) are outstanding; (iii) the number of cases which resulted in compensation being awarded to the employee; and (iv) the total of the compensation paid.

(AQW 4515/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of staff grievances and the outcome for the last five years is detailed in the tables below.

AQW 4515-10 STAFF GRIEVANCES 2004/2005

Council	Number	Upheld	Dismissed	Outstanding	Withdrawn	Compensation £
Antrim	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ards	5	3	2	0	0	0
Armagh	3	0	3	0	0	0
Ballymena	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	18	2	9	0	7	0
Carrickfergus	0	0	0	0	0	0
Castlereagh	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Coleraine	1	0	1	0	0	0
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	N/A	0	0	0	0	0
Derry	1	0	1	0	0	5,000
Down	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dungannon & S Tyrone	4	0	2	0	2	10,000
Fermanagh	0	0	0	0	0	0
Larne	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn*	9	4	5	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne*	5	1	3	1	0	0
Newtownabbey*	8	4	4	0	0	0
North Down*	3	0	3	0	0	0
Omagh*	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strabane	2	2	0	0	0	0
Total	59	16	33	1	9	15,000

* Calendar years

N/A not readily available in time permitted

AQW 4515-10 STAFF GRIEVANCES 2005/2006

Council	Number	Upheld	Dismissed	Outstanding	Withdrawn	Compensation £
Antrim	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ards	3	3	0	0	0	0
Armagh	2	0	2	0	0	0
Ballymena	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	20	8	7	0	5	0
Carrickfergus	1	0	0	0	1	0
Castlereagh	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Coleraine	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	0	0	0	0	0	0
Derry	0	0	0	0	0	0
Down	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dungannon & S Tyrone	1	1	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh	1	0	1	0	0	0
Larne	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn*	5	0	5	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne*	12	0	11	0	1	0
Newtownabbey*	4	2	2	0	0	318
North Down*	7	1	6	0	0	10,000
Omagh*	1	1	0	0	0	0
Strabane	2	2	0	0	0	0
Total	59	18	34	0	7	10,318

* Calendar years
N/A not readily available in time permitted

AQW 4515-10 STAFF GRIEVANCES 2006/2007

Council	Number	Upheld	Dismissed	Outstanding	Withdrawn	Compensation £
Antrim	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ards	3	0	3	0	0	0
Armagh	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	1	1	0	0	0	40,000
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	9	1	8	0	0	0
Carrickfergus	2	1	0	0	1	5,000
Castlereagh	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Coleraine	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	23	3	16	4	0	1,000
Derry	2	0	2	0	0	9,126
Down	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dungannon & S Tyrone	8	3	1	0	4	2,283
Fermanagh	2	0	2	0	0	0
Larne	1	0	1	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn*	5	1	4	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne*	19	3	14	0	2	0
Newtownabbey*	3	1	2	0	0	151,905
North Down*	4	0	4	0	0	0
Omagh*	4	3	1	0	0	0
Strabane	2	2	0	0	0	0
Total	88	19	58	4	7	209,314

* Calendar years
N/A not readily available in time permitted

AQW 4515-10 STAFF GRIEVANCES 2007/2008

Council	Number	Upheld	Dismissed	Outstanding	Withdrawn	Compensation £
Antrim	5	2	3	0	0	0
Ards	3	0	3	0	0	0
Armagh	2	0	2	0	0	0
Ballymena	1	0	1	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	20	2	11	2	5	0
Carrickfergus	1	1	0	0	0	2,500
Castlereagh	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Coleraine	9	5	2	1	1	26,186
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	10	0	7	3	0	7,000
Derry	3	1	2	0	0	53,221
Down	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dungannon & S Tyrone	12	10	2	0	0	39,245
Fermanagh	12	0	12	0	0	0
Larne	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn*	8	2	6	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne*	26	3	15	3	5	0
Newtownabbey*	12	3	9	0	0	20
North Down*	3	0	3	0	0	0
Omagh*	1	0	1	0	0	0
Strabane	2	2	0	0	0	0
Total	130	31	79	9	11	128,172

* Calendar years

N/A not readily available in time permitted

AQW 4515-10 STAFF GRIEVANCES 2008/2009

Council	Number	Upheld	Dismissed	Outstanding	Withdrawn	Compensation
Antrim	8	0	8	0	0	0
Ards	2	1	1	0	0	0
Armagh	3	0	3	0	0	0
Ballymena	1	0	0	1	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	44	8	22	4	10	0
Carrickfergus	6	2	1	0	3	22,550
Castlereagh	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a
Coleraine	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	31	3	0	3	0	0
Derry	2	0	2	0	2	17,000
Down	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a
Dungannon & S Tyrone	1	0	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh	0	0	0	0	0	0
Larne	1	0	1	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn*	6	3	3	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne*	18	0	7	7	4	0
Newtownabbey*	4	0	4	0	0	0
North Down*	8	0	7	1	0	0
Omagh*	7	1	3	3	0	0
Strabane	1	1	0	0	0	0
Total	143	19	62	19	19	39,550

* Calendar years

N/A not readily available in time permitted

Council Minutes: Publishing Online

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list (i) those councils who publish minutes of their meetings online and have a link to these minutes on the home page of their website; and (ii) those councils who do not.

(AQW 4522/10)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Twenty four of the twenty six district councils publish minutes of their meetings online and 23 of those provide a direct link from their website home page, Derry City Council provides a link from the online A-Z page of their website.
- (ii) Castlereagh Borough Council and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council do not publish minutes online.

Council Minutes: Publishing

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list the councils who do not publish minutes of all (i) council meetings; and (ii) committee meetings.

(AQW 4532/10)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Castlereagh Borough Council and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council do not publish minutes of council meetings.
- (ii) Castlereagh Borough Council, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council do not publish committee meeting minutes. Magherafelt District Council and Moyle District Council do not have any committees so minutes are not produced.

Adam Armstrong: Planning Applications

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many times since 2003 has Mrs Iris Robinson made representations to the Planning Service in relation to planning applications which were submitted by Adam Armstrong and associated companies, including R&A Developments and Mar Properties; and (ii) to list these planning applications.

(AQW 4536/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department's records indicated that since 2003, Mrs Iris Robinson made a number of representations on 4 planning applications submitted by Adam Armstrong and associated companies including R & A Developments and Mar Properties. The list of planning applications is 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 the land rather than an individual.

Planning Application	Applicant	Proposal	Location
Y/2004/0118/F	Mar Properties Ltd	Erection of 6 No dwellings	Elim Pentecostal Church Youth Hall, Grand Prix Park, Ballybeen, Dundonald
X/2005/0653/O	Castlebawn Ltd	Retail proposals	Newtownards
X/2005/1156/F	Tescos Stores Ltd & Castlebawn Ltd	Retail proposals	Newtownards

Planning Application	Applicant	Proposal	Location
X/2009/0465/F	Tescos Stores Ltd & Castlebawn Ltd	Retail proposals	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.

Adam Armstrong: Planning Applications

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many times since 2003 has Mr Peter Robinson MP, MLA made representations to the Planning Service in relation to planning applications which were submitted by Adam Armstrong and associated companies, including R&A Developments and Mar Properties; and (ii) to list these planning applications.

(AQW 4537/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department's records indicate that since 2003 Mr Peter Robinson made no representations to planning applications by Adam Armstrong and associated companies including R&A Developments and Mar Properties.

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.

As it is not uncommon for developers to establish a company to deal with a specific development proposal 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 Appeals Commission

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to list any political representation on record in support of his Department's decision to overturn a Planning Appeals Commission verdict in 1983 against a housing development at Cairnshill, Newtownbreda.

(AQW 4539/10)

Minister of the Environment: In February 1983, Mr David Mitchell MP - Parliamentary Under Secretary responsible for the Department of the Environment at that time - granted outline planning permission for residential development on lands at Cairnshill, Newtownbreda.

In making his decision, Mr Mitchell said he had tried to strike a balance between the demand - at that time - for new housing in South and East Belfast, the views of Castlereagh District Council and the views of local residents. His decision followed careful consideration of a report on the proposal by the Planning Appeals Commission.

The views of the Council were the only political representations that were made in respect of the application; the Council raised no objection in principle to housing on the site but registered their concerns about the number of proposed dwellings to be built.

Mourne Heritage Trust

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department has considered establishing a Service Level Agreement with the Mourne Heritage Trust.

(AQW 4552/10)

Minister of the Environment: NIEA is currently reviewing its funding arrangements for all the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty management bodies; this will include consideration of the merits of Service Level Agreements (SLA) as opposed to grant aid. If it is concluded that an SLA is a preferable funding mechanism then NIEA will discuss establishing an SLA with Mourne Heritage Trust at an appropriate stage.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency Education Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3648/10, to detail (i) the number of Northern Ireland Environment Agency education sites; and (ii) the locations of these sites.

(AQW 4558/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency provides an education service at five sites. They are located at:

- Crawfordsburn Country Park
- Peatlands Park
- Carrickfergus Castle
- Castle Archdale Country Park
- Roe Valley Country Park

Occasional visits may be arranged at other sites, but these would be infrequent.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency Education Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment how many schools in each Education and Library Board area have visited Northern Ireland Environment Agency sites with Educators, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4559/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of schools in each of the Education and Library Board areas who have visited NIEA sites with Educators is set out in the table below:-

	2007	2008	2009	Total
BELB	55	56	60	171
NEELB	66	83	101	250
SEELB	42	51	53	146
SELB	58	64	45	167
WELB	97	86	67	250
Total	318	340	326	984

Ards and Down Area Plan 2015

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of staff currently working on the Ards and Down Area Plan; (ii) the estimated cost of producing the plan; and (iii) a timescale for its completion.

(AQW 4582/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Ards and Down Area Plan was adopted on 30 March 2009, after a lengthy process that began with its initiation in 1999. This involved extensive consultation with both the public and the Council, and a public inquiry where objections to the Plan were heard by the Planning Appeals Commission.

The number of staff working in the Ards and Down Team was reduced following the adoption of the Plan and there are currently two members of staff working full time on tasks associated with the Ards and Down Plan and two members of staff working on a part time basis. Since work commenced on the Plan in 1999, just over £4,000,000 has been spent on the Plan process.

Access to Public Land for Horse-riders

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to increase access to public land for horse-riders.

(AQW 4606/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department provides facilities for horse-riders at three of its Country Parks. Otherwise horse riding is not permitted at NIEA properties because of concerns relating to the safety of other users.

It is for other Departments and local Councils to consider whether they can accommodate horse-riders at their properties.

Bridleways

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to increase the number of bridleways available for use by horse-riders.

(AQW 4608/10)

Minister of the Environment: Responsibility for the assertion, protection and provision of bridleways lies with District Councils under the Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency, through its Natural Heritage Grants Programme, supports the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN). CAAN's objectives include working with the British Horse Society on the development of off-road horse riding trails for public use.

Nitrates Directive Action Programme

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment how many farms breached the Nitrates Directive Action Programme by spreading slurry between 16 October 2009 and 31 January 2010.

(AQW 4625/10)

Minister of the Environment: Northern Ireland Environment Agency officers investigated and confirmed 8 breaches of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations involving farmers spreading slurry during the closed period 16 October 2009 to 31 January 2010.

Good Relations Remit

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how many staff are currently employed under the Good Relations remit of each council.

(AQW 4653/10)

Minister of the Environment: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Councils are statutory authorities with their own equality duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, including responsibility for promoting good relations. The employment of staff for this purpose is therefore a matter for individual councils.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of the Environment if he will publish all reports commissioned by the Planning Service, including those assessing noise levels, which were used in its consideration of the planning application to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport.

(AQW 4665/10)

Minister of the Environment: The application to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport has been designated by the Planning Service as being of major importance under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991. This means that the decision on the application will be taken by me as the

Minister of the Environment. In considering the application and in the preparation of advice for me on the matter, the Planning Service commissioned an independent report to consider noise aspects associated with the application. While the planning application file can be viewed under the Open File policy, some documents cannot be released at this stage. The independent noise report is one such document since this is currently an internal document which remains under consideration and review by the Planning Service as part of the process involved in preparing advice for me on the application under Article 31 procedures.

The decision not to release the noise report at this time has been taken in accordance with regulation 12(4)(e) of the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

I recognise the significant interest in this application and I can assure you that the noise report will be released as soon as I am in a position to do so.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of whether the plans for the proposed extension of George Best Belfast City Airport should be classed as a major planning application; and if so, whether a public enquiry will be held.

(AQW 4696/10)

Minister of the Environment: The planning application for an extension to the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport was designated as one of major importance under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 on 23 December 2008. Under the Article 31 procedure one option open to my Department is to cause a public local inquiry to be held by the Planning Appeals Commission. However, until such time as consideration of the proposal has been finalised it is not possible to confirm the procedural route to be adopted. My officials are progressing the application as quickly as it is possible to do so and expect to be in a position to make a recommendation to me on the way forward in the near future.

Careful consideration will be given to all the issues that have been raised in representations to my Department including noise contours, health impact assessments and passenger numbers.

In line with Article 31(5) of the 1991 Order the decision of the Department on an application to which this Article applies shall be final. In my role as Minister of the Environment I will therefore be responsible for making the final decision. As is normal practice with Article 31 applications I will be writing to all MLAs, including Executive colleagues to inform them of my decision.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if he will take into account (i) noise contours; (ii) health impact assessments; and (iii) passenger numbers when considering plans for the proposed extension of the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport.

(AQW 4697/10)

Minister of the Environment: The planning application for an extension to the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport was designated as one of major importance under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 on 23 December 2008. Under the Article 31 procedure one option open to my Department is to cause a public local inquiry to be held by the Planning Appeals Commission. However, until such time as consideration of the proposal has been finalised it is not possible to confirm the procedural route to be adopted. My officials are progressing the application as quickly as it is possible to do so and expect to be in a position to make a recommendation to me on the way forward in the near future.

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responsible for making the final decision. As is normal practice with Article 31 applications I will be writing to all MLAs, including Executive colleagues to inform them of my decision.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if the planning application for the proposed extension of the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport will require final approval from the Executive. (AQW 4698/10)

Minister of the Environment: The planning application for an extension to the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport was designated as one of major importance under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 on 23 December 2008. Under the Article 31 procedure one option open to my Department is to cause a public local inquiry to be held by the Planning Appeals Commission. However, until such time as consideration of the proposal has been finalised it is not possible to confirm the procedural route to be adopted. My officials are progressing the application as quickly as it is possible to do so and expect to be in a position to make a recommendation to me on the way forward in the near future.

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Department of Finance and Personnel

Rate Arrears

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the current level of rates arrears is. (AQW 4430/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): At any point in time, the total amount of ratepayer debt comprises two elements: the previous years' ratepayer debt and in-year debt.

At 31 January 2010, the previous years' ratepayer debt of £138 million at 31 March 2009 had been reduced to £77 million.

It is difficult to quantify in-year ratepayer debt given that, as part of normal business, bills are issued on a daily basis. Therefore, debt for the 2009-2010 year will not be known with certainty until the Statement of Rate Levy & Collection is completed in May 2010.

The collection of all rates due remains a very high priority for Land & Property Services, and rigorous pursuit of outstanding debt continues.

Rate Collection Target

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the performance of Land and Property Services in relation to rate collection and achieving the 98% collection target. (AQW 4431/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 31 January 2010, Land & Property Services had collected rates to the value of £930 million. This compares with £910 million at the same time last year. In-year collection of rates at 31 January against the Agency's key target was 91%.

Because of the many factors that contribute to the collection target, it is difficult to predict with certainty what the end of year figure will be. However, despite the difficult financial climate, Land &

Property Services continues on a daily basis to issue rate bills, collect money due, and take debt recovery action on unpaid rates.

BBC Spotlight programme

Mr C McDevitt asked the minister of Finance and Personnel (i) if he can confirm that his Department issued instructions to the Departmental Solicitor's Office arising from which Mr Paul Maguire QC was appointed to provide an opinion on matters raised in the BBC Spotlight programme of January 7 2010; and (ii) whether Mr Paul Maguire QC was appointed by official instruction, and if so, by officials at which grade and in which Department.

(AQW 4451/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Departmental Solicitor's Office instructed Senior Crown Counsel to provide an Opinion arising from the BBC Spotlight programme of January 7 2010 at the request of the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

BBC Spotlight Programme

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the instructions issued by the Departmental Solicitor's Office to Mr Paul Maguire QC regarding the opinion he has been asked to provide on allegations raised in the BBC Spotlight Programme of 7 January 2010.

(AQW 4452/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not appropriate to provide details of the instructions sent to Counsel other than to state that advice was sought in relation to the allegation in the Spotlight programme that the First Minister acted in breach of the Ministerial Code, Ministerial Code of Conduct and the Pledge of Office.

BBC Spotlight Programme

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when Mr Paul Maguire QC will deliver his opinion on the conduct of the First Minister regarding the allegations made in the BBC Spotlight Programme of 7 January 2010.

(AQW 4453/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Senior Crown Counsel delivered his Opinion on 3 February 2010.

Rate Allowances

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if rate allowances are available to tenants who hold long-term leases on properties and will not benefit from the sale of the property; and if not, why not.

(AQW 4512/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not necessarily the case that tenants who hold long term leases do not benefit financially from the sale of a property, particularly if there are a number of years unexpired on the lease.

Notwithstanding this, it is important to note that the rating system operates on the basis of occupation and is blind to the way in which a property is held. This applies whether the ratepayer is a householder or business and whether the property is held under a lease or a freehold.

Rating legislation contains title assumptions on which the capital or net annual value is based, regardless of the person's actual interest in the property. For domestic property it is assumed that it is sold with vacant possession and a fee simple absolute or, in the case of a flat, a lease for 99 years. For non domestic property it is assumed it is held under lease from year to year. One exception is the social housing sector where the value is assessed as a standard percentage addition to the rent charged for the property and paid by the landlord.

Landlord allowances can apply to the owners of properties let out to transient tenants. These are mostly (but not exclusively) houses, including those in multiple occupation, though it does not make any difference whether the landlord holds a long lease or a freehold interest in the property.

Generally all entitlements, reliefs, allowances and discounts apply equally to all ratepayers within the broad sector concerned (domestic and commercial) irrespective of the way in which the property is held.

Three new schemes will come into effect this April, which, for good reasons, will only apply to owner occupiers in the domestic sector; a pensioner deferment scheme and green rebate scheme.

Rate Arrears

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many non-domestic properties are currently in rate arrears since the introduction of the new Net Annual Value.

(AQW 4581/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: As of 7 February 2010, there were 12,858 non-domestic ratepayers with ratepayer debt dating from 31 March 2009 or earlier. It is difficult to quantify in-year ratepayer debt given that, as part of normal business, bills are issued on a daily basis. Therefore, debt for the 2009-2010 year will not be known with certainty until the Statement of Rate Levy & Collection is completed in May 2010.

The collection of all rates due remains a very high priority for Land & Property Services, and rigorous pursuit of outstanding debt continues.

Net Annual Values have been the basis of Non-Domestic rating in Northern Ireland since 1972.

Equal Pay Offer

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has had any discussions with NIPSA regarding former civil servants who left the service prior to August 2008 and are not eligible under the Equal Pay offer.

(AQW 4596/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have had two meetings with NIPSA to discuss, in general terms, the overall approach to resolving the equal pay issue. These meetings did not cover the detail of the component elements of the settlement. The specific aspects of the settlement, including the eligibility of former civil servants to benefit from any settlement, have been addressed by my officials in great detail in their negotiations with NIPSA. The proposed settlement negotiated by my officials has been accepted by NIPSA and plans are being made for its implementation with NIPSA's full support.

Rate Arrears

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of households; and (ii) the total amount owed in rate arrears, in (a) Northern Ireland as a whole; and (b) each local Council area.

(AQW 4633/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below summarises the numbers of domestic properties with ratepayer debt dating from 31 March 2009 or earlier, the total amount of domestic ratepayer debt, and its breakdown between District Council areas which remains uncollected as at 10 February 2010. It is difficult to quantify in-year ratepayer debt given that, as part of normal business, bills are issued on a daily basis. The debt for the 2009-2010 year will not be known with certainty until the Statement of Rate Levy & Collection is completed in May 2010 and therefore the figures in the table exclude in-year debt.

The collection of all rates due remains a very high priority for Land & Property Services, and rigorous pursuit of outstanding debt continues. This includes agreeing payment arrangements where ratepayers are having difficulties paying the outstanding debt.

District Council	Amount of domestic ratepayer debt £	Number of domestic occupancies with pre-March 2009 ratepayer debt
Antrim	659,557	956
Ards	1,248,180	1,999
Armagh	1,171,809	1,581
Ballymena	408,291	802
Ballymoney	316,791	530
Banbridge	768,902	1,251
Belfast	7,886,073	12,657
Carrickfergus	707,447	1,082
Castlereagh	721,286	1,235
Coleraine	774,060	1,326
Cookstown	350,453	656
Craigavon	1,477,500	2,753
Down	1,367,465	2,008
Dungannon & South Tyrone	625,720	974
Fermanagh	600,991	981
Larne	310,214	593
Limavady	416,972	743
Lisburn	1,759,162	2,507
Derry	1,963,115	3,464
Magherafelt	309,015	614
Moyle	235,463	322
Newry & Mourne	1,746,173	2,706
Newtownabbey	1,334,008	2,204
North down	1,282,137	2,170
Omagh	510,684	782
Strabane	559,081	1,021
Totals	29,510,549	47,917

Notes:

The LPS rating system records occupancies, not households.

The above figures exclude mixed properties that have both a domestic and non-domestic valuation.

Dormant Bank Accounts

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he would consider introducing a scheme to allow money from dormant bank accounts to be used to address child poverty.

(AQW 4651/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Under the terms of the legislation, the scheme provides a general definition of “social or environmental purposes” on which unclaimed assets must be spent. The legislation also provides for the devolved administrations to determine their own priorities for distribution which reflect the needs of the community within this over-arching theme.

Public consultation on the spending priorities for the Northern Ireland Dormant Accounts Scheme was held between 6th August and 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.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Fairtrade Products

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many contracts for the provision of staff uniforms and bed clothes in the Health Service currently have a requirement to include Fairtrade fabrics; and (ii) how many catering contracts, managed by his Department or the Health and Social Care Trusts, currently have a requirement to include Fairtrade products.

(AQW 4387/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): Procurement in these fields is governed by the Public Contracts Regulations 2006 and Amendment Regulations 2009, which stipulate open, fair and equitable tendering of goods and services. The tendering process may also take specific account of ethical trading principles – for example, in requiring traders to have in place a policy on ethical trading, or adherence to the European Commission’s Green Public Procurement guidelines for textiles. It would be inconsistent with that legal framework to favour any particular brand, such as Fairtrade, above others.

Physiotherapists

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many physiotherapists with a specialist knowledge of Multiple Sclerosis currently operate in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 4399/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The requested information is provided in the table below.

Physiotherapists with neuro-disability skills who will treat patients with Multiple Sclerosis

Trust	Headcount	WTE1
Belfast	9	7.27
Northern	2	2

Trust	Headcount	WTE1
South Eastern	12	9.4
Southern	9	8
Western	12	10.22

Source: Health & Social Care Trusts

Notes: 1 WTE= whole-time equivalent

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are available to people diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 4400/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People diagnosed with multiple sclerosis have access to the full range of core community health and social care services across Northern Ireland including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, community nursing, speech and language therapy, dietetics, social work / social care, domiciliary care, day care and day time opportunities and respite, including specialist respite.

Physiotherapists

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any plans to increase the number of physiotherapists with specialist knowledge of Multiple Sclerosis over the next three years.

(AQW 4401/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Whilst there are no specialist physiotherapists assigned exclusively to work with Multiple Sclerosis patients, sufferers are assessed and treated by specialist physiotherapists with neuro-disability skills in all of the five Health and Social Care Trusts, as part of their caseload. All physiotherapists study neurological conditions, including multiple sclerosis, during their undergraduate training. As part of their continuing professional development, registered physiotherapists receive training in advanced clinical skills, which can be used in delivering services to patients with Multiple Sclerosis.

Nursing and Skills Mix Staff: Recourse Issues

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many incident report no1 forms have been lodged in relation to recourse issues for nursing and skills mix staff, with particular reference to Neuro Science and the Fracture Trauma Unit in the Royal Victoria Hospital, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4436/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below displays the total number of incident reports forms for the Neuro Science and Fracture Trauma Unit in the Royal Victoria Hospital in each of the last three years.

INCIDENT SUMMARY REPORT: RESOURCE ISSUES FOR NURSING & SKILL MIX STAFF FRACTURES TRAUMA UNIT & NEUROSCIENCES RVH 2007, 2008 2009

	2007	2008	2009
Fractures Trauma Unit	46	35	100
Neurosciences	08	01	14

Source Belfast Trust

Royal Hospital Staff: Stress Counselling

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff within the Royal Hospital have been referred for stress counselling and to occupational health for work related issues in each of the last three years, broken down by specialty and an indication whether each case was a self-referral or a management referral.

(AQW 4437/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of Occupational Health Service (OHS) referrals by management and from individuals at the Royal Group of Hospitals is set out below. Information is available from April 2006 until August 2008. From September 2008, the RGHT OHS was subsumed into the wider occupational health service within the Belfast HSC Trust, with data then recorded for all Trust employees. Stress counselling data is not readily available as this was a self-referral confidential service. Speciality is also not readily available.

ROYAL GROUP OF HOSPITALS OHS REFERRALS

	Apr '06 to March '07 (inc)		Apr '07 to Mar '08 (inc)		Apr '08 to Aug '08 (inc)
Work related OHS	Mgmt Ref	19	Mgmt Ref	9	Mgmt Ref 0
Referral	Self Ref	0	Self Ref	2	Self Ref 0

Royal Hospital Nursing Staff: Stress-related Absenteeism

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the levels of stress-related absenteeism among Royal Hospital nursing staff in (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; and (iii) 2009, broken down by nursing specialty.

(AQW 4438/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department does not collect sickness absence data by the specific hospital or specialty but by the Nursing and Midwifery terms and conditions group. The information is presented by Trust and is published on a bi-annual basis on the departmental website at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm.

Private Medical Consultancy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust spent £35m on private medical consultancy in a bid to reduce waiting times, how many of the consultants used hold Health Service contracts; and how many patients used this service.

(AQW 4439/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of consultants used who hold Health Service contracts could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Health of Residents of the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any plans his Department has to improve the health of residents of the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 4467/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a range of health and wellbeing initiatives currently being delivered in, or have been made available to groups and organisations in the Kilcooley area.

This work continues and the local community is being actively encouraged to engage in health and well being planning processes.

As a result of the implementation of the Investing for Health Strategy in the Eastern Area a number of Community Development and Health Workers (CDHW) have been employed

The local Partnership, which oversees the North Down & Ards Health Improvement Plan, provides funding for infrastructure and support for programme resources to a number of local voluntary organisations across the area.

The South Eastern HSC Trust (SET) and the Kilcooley Community Forum, in partnership with DSD, have provided a mental health worker specifically for the Kilcooley Estate

Health Debates

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the reasons for his absence from a number of recent health debates in the Assembly, given that there is no longer the same demand on his time following a reduction in the reported number of cases of swine flu.

(AQW 4472/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I indicated to the Business Committee that I was not available for Assembly business on 2 February. Despite this notification, I was named to respond to the motion on financial aid and advice services for people undergoing cancer treatment on that date – a motion I thought, in any case, more appropriate to my Department of Social Development ministerial colleague.

I have not been absent from any other recent health debates in the Assembly.

Diabetes

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with (i) Type 1 diabetes; and (ii) Type 2 diabetes in (a) Ards; (b) Strangford; and (c) Northern Ireland in total, in the past twelve months.

(AQW 4474/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Diabetes

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that Diabetes UK estimate that 12,500 people here are unaware that they have diabetes, to outline his Department's strategy for increasing awareness of the need for diabetes checks.

(AQW 4476/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has a range of public health and health promotion strategies in place which seek to raise public awareness of diabetes and the factors which can lead to the development of diabetes. Patients who are concerned about their risk of developing diabetes can seek advice from their GP and other healthcare professionals. Primary Care teams will also routinely identify patients with a high risk of having diabetes in the context of cardiovascular risk assessment.

Blood Sugar Levels of Children

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is an initiative between his Department and the Department of Education to check the blood sugar levels of children in primary or secondary schools.

(AQW 4478/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The UK National Screening Committee's view is that there is no justification for universal population screening for diabetes and there is no national initiative to check the blood sugar levels of children in primary or secondary schools.

However, my Department and the Department of Education, together with the Public Health Agency have been working on a joint initiative since autumn 2007 to improve nutrition standards and to promote healthy eating in schools.

Programmes also exist across the Province for all Year 1 and Year 8/9 children to have their weight checked by the school nurse and any children with problems of over- or underweight are referred to the Dietetic Service.

Health and Social Care Trust Chief Executives and Board Members: Pay

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who sets the pay rates for Chief Executives and board members of Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 4487/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since May 2007 the Executive has placed the responsibility for setting Public Sector Pay policy with the Department of Finance and Personnel Minister.

DHSSPS Budget

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proportion of this years budget will be recurrent next year.

(AQW 4501/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Out of the total allocation made, more than £3.2billion or 80% of this year's budget will be made recurrent next year.

Dementia

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are diagnosed with dementia in the age bracket (i) 50-60; (ii) 61-70; and (iii) 71 and above.

(AQW 4508/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Funding for Dementia Services

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much funding was allocated to dementia services in each of the last two financial years; and how much has been set aside for this financial year.

(AQW 4510/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer provided in AQW 3255/10.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr P Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is a requirement on medical practitioners to seek information from a child's school before completing an assessment for diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder; and if so, whether this happens in practice.

(AQW 4525/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Paediatricians do not diagnose ADHD without completion of the Conners' rating scale by a teacher who knows the child.

Day Centres for People with a Learning Disability

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many day centres for people with a learning disability currently operate in each Health and Social Care Trust area; (ii) how many of these have been certified as registered with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority;

and (iii) to indicate the average timeframe between application for registration and final certification of such facilities.

(AQW 4546/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The table below provides a breakdown of the number of day care centres for people with a learning disability operating in each HSC Trust area.

HSC Trust	Day Care Settings (statutory & voluntary)
Belfast	28
Northern	37
South Eastern	30
Southern	39
Western	56

- (ii) There are 26 registered statutory day care centres for people with a learning disability.
- (iii) The average timeframe between application for registration and final certification in respect of these 26 facilities is 472 days. There is however considerable variation between the shortest time and longest, which is determined by the details of each individual application.

Ravara House, Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently resident in Ravara House, Bangor.

(AQW 4550/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information provided by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust indicated that, as at 8th February 2010, there are currently 40 residents in Ravara House, Bangor.

Efficiency Savings

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency savings have been aimed at health quangos.

(AQW 4551/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I interpret your request to relate to Arms Length Bodies of the Department. No part of the system has been exempted.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr M Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many medical practitioners in the Newry area are qualified to treat patients diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis; (ii) how accessible are MS services in this area for patients; and (iii) if he will conduct a review of the treatment afforded to patients diagnosed with MS within this area to ascertain how services can be improved.

(AQW 4553/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are 3 Consultant Neurologists working within the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. All are qualified to treat patients diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. There is also a Multiple Sclerosis Specialist Nurse who is based at Craigavon Area Hospital.

In the Newry area, people with Multiple Sclerosis have access to the full range of core community health and social care provision, typically provided close to, or in, their own homes. In addition, there is a neurology clinic at Daisy Hill Hospital; a specialist MS clinic in Craigavon Area Hospital; and some people may attend the Multiple Sclerosis clinic at Belfast City Hospital.

In 2002 my Department carried out a Review of Adult Neurology Services and published recommendations for improvements in the provision and delivery of services. The Health and Social Care Board has been tasked to carry out a full and comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the recommendations and report its findings to my Department.

Medical School in Derry

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the provision of a medical school in Derry.

(AQW 4556/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department does not currently have any plans to establish a second medical school in Northern Ireland and does not consider that a second medical school could be justified. The Department has increased significantly the investment in the number of undergraduate medical student places at Queen's University Belfast. By 2010 the output will have increased by 40%, compared with 2005.

Swine Flu Vaccine

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 4101/10, to detail (i) the cost of administering a single swine flu vaccination; and (ii) the total cost of administering the swine flu vaccine to date, broken down by 'at-risk' group.

(AQW 4562/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) GPs are paid £5.25 to administer each dose of swine flu vaccine. All other costs are on a programme basis and cannot be disaggregated to single vaccine level.
- (ii) As the vaccination programme remains ongoing it is not possible to provide the total cost of administering the vaccination programme to date, broken down by 'at risk' groups.

Termination of Pregnancy Guidelines

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assurances he can offer that the interim termination of pregnancy guidelines will protect Health Service staff and uphold the rights of an unborn child.

(AQW 4722/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The withdrawal of my Department's publication "Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy: The Law and Clinical Practice in Northern Ireland" left Health Professionals without guidance on the law in Northern Ireland relating to the termination of pregnancy. The interim Guidance was issued to protect health professionals who were operating in the absence of guidance on the Northern Ireland legal framework.

The recent High Court ruling determined that the March 2009 draft of the Guidance was appropriate in its consideration of the rights of the unborn child.

The sections on conscientious objection and counselling are being redrafted. They will then be subject to a public consultation and will be put before the Executive for consideration before they are incorporated into the revised Guidance.

Department for Regional Development

iLink Card

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (1) the number of iLink cards bought at Belfast International Airport; and (2) the number of (a) single; and (b) return journeys to and from

Belfast and the International Airport made using (i) iLink card; (ii) any other multi-journey card; or (iii) cash payments in each week since the iLink card was introduced.

(AQW 4414/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): The information you asked for is not readily available in the form requested. However, Translink has provided me with the following information:-

1. Since the introduction of iLink on 5 October 2009 until 31 January 2010, 138 iLink cards have been issued at Belfast International Airport.
2. During this period, 632 journeys have been made using iLink cards on the Translink 300 service which serves Belfast International Airport. Translink does not record whether these journeys were single journeys or part of a return journey.
3. During the same period, 17,358 journeys were made using Ulsterbus Multi-Journey cards on the Translink 300 service. Again Translink does not record whether these journeys were single journeys or part of a return journey.
4. For the period in question, summary totals show that 31,108 journeys were made through Cash Single tickets on the 300 service and 34,656 journeys made through Cash Return tickets on the service.

It should be noted that these figures do not include any journeys made by holders of concessionary Smartpasses.

Eskra Community Association

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development whether Roads Service will initiate discussions with the Eskra Community Association about working with the Eskra and Newtownsaville communities about ideas, including community self-help, to improve road conditions during freezing weather.

(AQW 4419/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is always available to meet with community groups to discuss local issues and potential solutions in accordance with established Roads Service policies. Eskra Community Association should contact Mr Derek Quinton, Section Engineer, Roads Service Western Division (028 82254620) to arrange a meeting.

Road and Street Signs

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail for each of the last five years (i) the number of road and street signs which have been ordered by his Department and subsequently repaired or replaced due to (a) spelling mistakes; (b) punctuation mistakes; (c) other grammatical errors; (d) incorrect information; (e) missing information; and (f) any other similar reason; and (ii) the associated cost of correcting these errors.

(AQW 4441/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not hold information on those road signs, that it has ordered, which had to be repaired or replaced due to errors associated with spelling, punctuation, information etc. I should point out that local councils are responsible for road naming and the provision and maintenance of the associated name plates.

Trees at Kingarve Road, Dungannon

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) why trees were cut down by Roads Service on private property at Kingarve Road, Dungannon, on Saturday 19 December 2009; (ii) who instructed this action; (iii) why the landowner was refused the timber after it had been cut; and (iv) what was done with the timber.

(AQW 4463/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that my Department's Roads Service received two complaints from the public regarding overgrown trees at Kingarve Road, Dungannon. Following an

inspection, Roads Service planned to cut back those trees overgrowing the road verge that were causing an obstruction of the road, and also, obscuring road signs and street lights. However, before this work could be undertaken, Roads Service received a call on their out of hours emergency telephone service, at approximately 7:30 am on Saturday 19 December 2009, advising that a branch had broken off one of the overgrown trees and was obstructing the road. The incident was referred to the local Roads Service supervisor, who arranged for the broken branch to be removed urgently. The supervisor also instructed the workmen to cut back the overgrown trees while they were on site with the required equipment, to avoid having to return to the location at a later date to undertake this work.

The Roads Service direct labour personnel lopped off all the overgrown branches, which were causing an obstruction along a 170 metre stretch of Kingarve Road. However, as well trimming the branches from the trees rooted in the road verge, they also, due to a misinterpretation of the instructions provided, inadvertently trimmed the branches from five trees that were not rooted in the road verge, which the landowner was responsible for maintaining. The instructions had been given by telephone, without the supervisor visiting the site, due to the work being undertaken outside of normal working hours.

I understand that when work was nearing completion, one of the landowners approached the workmen and enquired who had given them permission to cut back the trees. I also understand that, at that time, he did not request the tree cuttings, the majority of which had been shredded on site. However later, after the Roads Service staff returned to their depot, the same landowner arrived and requested that the remaining cuttings, which had not been shredded, be returned to him. The workmen did not deliver the remaining tree cuttings to the landowner, as they were unsure if he was entitled to them but shredded them later that day, therefore, they were not available to be returned to the landowners when technical staff returned to work on the Monday morning. I can confirm, however, that the shredded material is still being held in Moygashel depot.

I should advise that, if Roads Service has to cut trees owned by landowners for reasons of road safety, the current policy is that the cuttings are to be placed on the landowner's land, near where the cutting took place, as the cuttings remain the property of that landowner. Roads Service has asked the Department's Central Claims Unit to investigate this case and advise the landowners concerned on the matter of compensation for tree cuttings retained by Roads Service.

Roads Service has confirmed that the amount of tree trimming undertaken at Kingarve Road was limited to that which the landowners would have been obliged to complete in order to remove the obstruction of the road.

Roads Service

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development how much Roads Service has spent in each constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4464/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not record details of its spend on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, it does keep details of its actual spend on Operation and Maintenance activities and Capital, during the preceding financial year, in each Council area.

The tables below detail the spend in each Council area, during the last three years:

District Council	Operation & Maintenance Spend		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Antrim	£3,251,000	£3,494,000	£3,507,000
Coleraine	£4,139,000	£4,449,000	£4,275,000
Limavady	£2,737,000	£3,573,000	£2,830,000
Moyle	£1,860,000	£2,093,000	£1,674,000

District Council	Operation & Maintenance Spend		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Ballymoney	£2,283,000	£2,430,000	£2,395,000
Derry	£5,281,000	£5,828,000	£5,876,000
Ballymena	£4,432,000	£4,537,000	£5,168,000
Larne	£2,754,000	£2,546,000	£2,238,000
Belfast	£13,730,000	£16,990,000	£13,976,000
Castlereagh	£3,029,000	£3,552,000	£3,429,000
Newtownabbey	£3,189,000	£4,576,000	£3,388,000
Carrickfergus	£1,764,000	£1,971,000	£1,642,000
North Down	£3,640,000	£3,974,000	£2,962,000
Lisburn	£5,695,000	£4,948,000	£7,704,000
Ards	£3,468,000	£5,014,000	£3,394,000
Armagh	£5,477,000	£7,539,000	£7,013,000
Newry & Mourne	£5,843,000	£6,212,000	£5,372,000
Banbridge	£3,841,000	£3,996,000	£3,404,000
Craigavon	£5,217,000	£5,478,000	£4,219,000
Down	£4,503,000	£4,262,000	£5,813,000
Magherafelt	£2,612,000	£3,834,000	£3,239,000
Omagh	£5,587,000	£6,487,000	£5,699,000
Strabane	£4,746,000	£5,258,000	£5,068,000
Cookstown	£2,857,000	£2,759,000	£2,739,000
Fermanagh	£6,737,000	£6,598,000	£7,036,000
Dungannon	£5,477,000	£5,781,000	£5,391,000
Totals	£114,149,000	£128,179,000	£119,451,000

District Council	Capital Spend		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Antrim	£2,801,000	£1,970,000	£848,000
Coleraine	£1,380,000	£2,090,000	£1,745,000
Limavady	£1,145,000	£1,450,000	£1,406,000
Moyle	£177,000	£287,000	£464,000
Ballymoney	£1,223,000	£510,000	£670,000
Derry	£3,754,000	£8,492,000	£19,397,000
Ballymena	£1,910,000	£6,170,000	£4,920,000

District Council	Capital Spend		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Larne	£346,000	£1,216,000	£2,074,000
Belfast	£26,628,000	£6,116,000	£11,503,000
Castlereagh	£835,000	£1,316,000	£444,000
Newtownabbey	£1,578,000	£1,965,000	£2,219,000
Carrickfergus	£2,566,000	£4,849,000	£4,165,000
North Down	£1,916,000	£1,770,000	£1,218,000
Lisburn	£3,673,000	£2,686,000	£2,345,000
Ards	£1,725,000	£1,960,000	£8,667,000
Armagh	£1,677,000	£3005,000	£2,446,000
Newry & Mourne	£62,010,000	£14,863,000	£4,627,000
Banbridge	£2,221,000	£887,000	£1,251,000
Craigavon	£1,803,000	£1,658,000	£1,704,000
Down	£1,539,000	£986,000	£1,341,000
Magherafelt	£966,000	£2,651,000	£2,544,000
Omagh	£3,455,000	£4,387,000	£11,534,000
Strabane	£2,067,000	£1,296,000	£695,000
Cookstown	£1,078,000	£865,000	£1,135,000
Fermanagh	£2,121,000	£4,017,000	£8,607,000
Dungannon	£15,361,000	£14,235,000	£4,622,000
Totals	£145,955,000	£91,697,000	£102,591,000

I should advise the Member that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. Major road improvements are prioritised on a countrywide basis, taking account of a broad range of criteria, such as strategic planning policy, traffic flow, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environmental impact, accessibility and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council, constituency or county in which they are located.

Traffic Management System on the Knock Road

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the impact on traffic volumes and related issues in the Cherryvalley, Kensington and Shandon Park areas of East Belfast as a result of proposed changes to the traffic management system on the Knock Road, as outlined in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan and the Regional Transport Strategy, (AQW 4469/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service published proposals to improve a narrow section of the A55 Outer Ring Road on 11 November 2009. These proposals included the widening of 1.3 km of existing road between the Glen Road and the King's Road junctions. This will provide a more consistent standard of carriageway, and improve the safety of this part of the strategic road network, as identified by the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan.

The scheme will also upgrade the traffic signals at the Shandon Park junction to fully control right turning movements, which will improve the poor safety record of this junction. This signal phasing will be configured to minimise the available green time for traffic turning right into, and exiting left from, Shandon Park. This will act as a control on the volume of traffic that can access Shandon Park.

I can advise the Member that an assessment has been made of the anticipated additional traffic levels along Shandon Park, Kensington Road and Cherryvalley when the scheme is constructed. Although the proposed arrangement may increase traffic levels during peak periods in Shandon Park, the increase in flow over an all day period is estimated to be of the order of 5%. Therefore, it is not expected that there will be any significant increase in traffic levels in Kensington Road and Cherryvalley as a result of the scheme. However, it should be noted that traffic levels are expected to increase in the longer term, as a result of general traffic growth, irrespective of whether the scheme is implemented or not.

You will also be aware that traffic calming has recently been introduced along Shandon Park and Kensington Road to reduce the speeds of all vehicles, and improve safety within the area.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the internal investigations carried out by NI Water on contracts it has awarded in each of the last five years; (ii) the financial value of these contracts; and (iii) to detail the outcome of those investigations which have been completed. **(AQW 4494/10)**

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that since it was appointed water and sewerage undertaker on 1 April 2007, investigations have been carried out on two contracts it awarded, following allegations relating to their procurement. The information requested in relation to these contracts is included in the table below:-

Contract Details	Financial Value of Contract	Outcome of Investigation
C335 maintenance of telecommunications network.	£3.7 million over 3 years	No substance to the allegations.
C071 provision of temporary technical support.	£5.9 million over 5 years.	Not yet complete but current evidence has not revealed any substance to the allegations.

In line with normal good practice NIW has also undertaken a number of internal audits, relating to contracts, in the following areas:-

- Customer billing and contact.
- Capital Works Programme.
- Engineering Procurement.
- Steria Exit.
- All contracts (excluding the Capital Works Programme).

A number of recommendations resulting from these internal audits have been accepted by management and an action plan for implementation is underway.

In addition, NIW has undertaken regular audits of its capital works programme as part of its normal business process reviews and Post Project Evaluations on a large number of contracts. Recommendations from these audits and lessons learnt from Post Project Evaluations have been incorporated into project delivery in a programme of continuous improvement.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if, as a result of investigations, NI Water has changed the way in which it manages and processes the awarding of contracts.

(AQW 4495/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that following investigations on contract C335, recommendations in relation to the tender process and monitoring of contracts are being implemented to ensure compliance with policies and best practice and to secure value for money. Investigations on contract C071 are still ongoing.

A number of recommendations resulting from internal audits relating to contracts have been accepted by management and an action plan for implementation is underway. In addition, recommendations from audits of the capital works programme and lessons learnt from Post Project Evaluations have been incorporated into project delivery in a programme of continuous improvement.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development which departments within NI Water were investigated as part of the internal investigations into the contracts it has awarded in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4496/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that investigations on contracts C335 and C071 were both undertaken in its Telecommunications Unit.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what contact NI Water has had with the Regulator in relation to internal investigations into contracts it has awarded in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4497/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the NI Authority for Utility Regulation was advised of the outcome of investigations on contract C335.

Easibus Service

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's plan to replace the Easibus service from Groomsport village to Bloomfield shopping centre.

(AQW 4509/10)

Minister for Regional Development: This is an operational matter for Translink. However, I have been informed that Translink intends to divert services from Ballywalter to Bangor to provide regular links between Groomsport and Bloomfield Shopping Centre. This adjustment will commence on 1 July 2010 and will also provide a direct link to the shopping centre for people living in Ballywalter and Donaghadee.

People who cannot access the Translink services from Groomsport may be able to avail of the services supported by my Department's Rural Transport Fund and provided by the local Rural Community Transport Partnership, Down District Accessible Transport.

Footpaths

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development if funding is available for joint schemes for new footpaths in Housing Executive areas.

(AQW 4511/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not make specific funds available for co-funded schemes to provide new footways within Housing Executive areas.

Any request for a new footway is fully assessed on an individual basis. If the results of the assessment indicate a need for a footway, this request must compete for priority and funding with other similar requests for inclusion in any future Roads Service works programme.

Road Service does, however, adopt carriageways and footways within Housing Executive estates which have been constructed to the required standard and meet the adoption criteria. Maintenance of such carriageways and footways is then carried out by Roads Service.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development whether internal investigations by NI Water into contracts it has awarded concluded that (i) an NI Water employee; or (ii) a contractor has been disadvantaged as a result of the contract that was investigated.

(AQW 4530/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that an investigation into contract C335 concluded that there was no verifiable evidence that an employee or a contractor had been disadvantaged as a result of the contract.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) if NI Water is aware of Government funding received by companies who were also awarded contracts by NI Water; (ii) to detail the value of funding given to these companies by his Department; and (iii) when the funding was awarded.

(AQW 4531/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is not aware of any Government funding received by companies to which it has awarded contracts.

A6 Dungiven-Caw Dualling Project

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development what provision will be made for (i) pedestrian; (ii) bicycle; and (iii) other non-motorised traffic as part of the A6 Dungiven-Caw dualling project.

(AQW 4555/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, to date, work on the A6 Dungiven to Caw scheme has been concentrated on finalising the overall horizontal and vertical alignment for the new dual carriageway. The Environmental Statement for the scheme will consider all the relevant issues associated with pedestrians, cyclists and other non-motorised traffic, and these will feed into the next stage scheme's detailed design phase.

Rocks or Boulders on Grass Verges

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what legislation exists to ensure that rural dwellers do not place large rocks or boulders on grass verges on narrow rural roads.

(AQW 4573/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is an offence under Articles 59 (Removal of nuisances) and 88 (Obstruction of roads) of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 to place large boulders on publicly maintained road verges. However, in most cases, Roads Service operates a toleration policy, unless there is a clear indication that the boulders are a danger to road users.

Roads Service identifies any boulders that have been placed on road verges, and are deemed to be a hazard, during their routine maintenance inspections. Reports are also received from members of the public. As a first step, Roads Service will ask the owner/occupier of the adjacent property to remove the obstruction. Should that fail, Roads Service has discretionary powers under Article 59 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993, to serve a notice on the owner/occupier requiring the removal of the danger or obstruction. If the owner/occupier fails to comply with the requirements of the notice, Roads Service may carry out the necessary works, and seek to recover the costs.

Rocks or Boulders on Grass Verges

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any enforcement action taken against people who have placed boulders or large rocks on grass verges on narrow rural roads, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4574/10)

Minister for Regional Development: As I advised the Member, in my response to Assembly Question, AQW 4573/10, it is an offence under Articles 59 (Removal of nuisances) and 88 (Obstruction of roads) of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 to place large boulders on publicly maintained road verges.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that although there have been numerous occasions over the last five years, when members of the public have been requested to remove boulders placed on road verges, all of these cases have been resolved, without the need for enforcement action.

Road Salt

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development where his Department purchases supplies of road salt.

(AQW 4578/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they purchase salt from the Irish Salt Mining and Exploration Co. Ltd, 10 Fort Road, Kilroot, Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim.

Bus Service from Limavady Town to Ballarena

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to introducing a bus service from Limavady town to Ballarena railway halt to increase passenger numbers on the Londonderry to Belfast line.

(AQW 4595/10)

Minister for Regional Development: This is an operational matter for Translink. However, I have been informed that Translink currently operates a service from Limavady to Coleraine that calls at Bellarena halt but that demand from passengers wanting to transfer from the bus to the train is extremely limited.

Translink considers that the introduction of a dedicated bus service to Ballarena railway halt would not be an efficient use of its limited resources.

Gritting Services

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the areas where gritting services are carried out by contract staff.

(AQW 4622/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that gritting operations from its Omagh and Strabane depots are carried out solely by Roads Service staff. However, in the majority of Roads Service's depot locations, the gritting operations are carried out by a combination of contract staff and Roads Service staff. The table below lists the Roads Service depots concerned:

DEPOTS WHERE GRITTING OPERATIONS ARE CARRIED OUT BY CONTRACT STAFF AND ROADS SERVICE STAFF

Armagh	Coleraine	Cookstown
Craigavon	Ballymoney	Magherafelt
Newry	Antrim	Fivemiletown
Banbridge	Ballymena	Belfast

Seaforde	Larne	Lisburn
Derry	Enniskillen	Bangor
Limavady	Dungannon	

Resurfacing Work at Main Street, Greyabbey

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development when the resurfacing work at Main Street, Greyabbey will be completed, following the completion of work on the water and sewage system.
(AQW 4623/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that proposals to undertake work on the sewerage system at Main Street, Greyabbey are under consideration but programme dates have not yet been set. Any work identified will be prioritised and is subject to availability of funding. The arrangements for road resurfacing work will be agreed with Roads Service nearer the commencement of the scheme.

Compensation for Falls on Defective Footpaths and Surfaces

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of compensation paid as a result of (i) falls and injuries; and (ii) damage to vehicles caused by defective footpaths and surfaces in the (a) Larne Borough Council; (b) Carrickfergus Borough Council; and (c) Newtownabbey Borough Council areas, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 4626/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Central Claims Unit maintains claims statistics on the basis of individual Roads Service Section Office areas. The Ballymena and Larne and Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus Section Office maintenance areas however correspond roughly with District Council areas and, in particular, the variances in respect of Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey are very minor. For this reason, the information in the form requested is not readily available but has been provided below, for each of the last three financial years, in respect of the two Roads Service Section Offices. The figures represent the total costs associated with successful claims ie compensation paid plus all other costs such as legal costs.

TOTAL COST OF COMPENSATION INCLUDING LEGAL AND OTHER COSTS

	Personal Injury			Vehicle Damage		
	C'Fergus £	Larne £	N'Abbey £	C'Fergus £	Larne £	N'abbey £
2008/09	238,497.05	11,292.48	254,213.98	943.61	1,262.42	6,952.66
2007/08	16,029.76	3,690.40	232,031.05	720.81	359.07	6,161.44
2006/07	64,271.27	22,054.75	240,603.28	3,462.93	162.73	2,681.63

Handrail at Greystone Road, Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development when the handrail, to facilitate pensioners and people with disabilities, will be installed at Greystone Road, Limavady.
(AQW 4648/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that my Department's Roads Service is in the process of appointing a contractor with a view of having this work completed as soon as possible.

I have asked the Acting Divisional Roads Manager for Northern Division, Deidre Mackle, to contact you when a more specific date has been agreed for the installation of the handrail.

Roads and Footpaths at Beverley Hills, Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to resurface the road and footpath infrastructure at the Beverley Hills area of Bangor.

(AQW 4658/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I would remind the Member that information on the completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in my Department's 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:

www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm

Roads and Footpaths in the Bangor Area

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to resurface the roads and footpaths in the Bangor area before the new financial year.

(AQW 4659/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I would remind the Member that information on the completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in my Department's 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:

www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm

Roads and Footpaths in the Holywood Area

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to resurface the roads and footpaths in the Holywood area before the new financial year.

(AQW 4660/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I would remind the Member that information on the completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in my Department's 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:

www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm

Tender Documents CO 71 and CO 58

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he can confirm that embedded contract personnel engaged under NI Water's contract services tender documents CO 71 and CO 58 have signed the Official Secrets Act, and if not, why not, considering they have access to commercially sensitive information.

(AQW 4680/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it does not recognise the term 'embedded contract personnel'. The Official Secrets Act 1989 does not apply to NIW or its contractors. The employees of contractors engaged by NIW under tenders CO71 and CO58 were therefore not required to sign a declaration under the Official Secrets Act but have a legal obligation under Conditions of Contract to comply with a confidentiality clause relating to access to commercially sensitive information.

Compensation Paid as a Result of Defective Footpaths and Surfaces

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of compensation paid as a result of falls and injuries caused by defective roads and footpaths in the (a) Larne Borough Council; (b) Carrickfergus Borough Council; and (c) Newtownabbey Borough Council areas, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4690/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Central Claims Unit maintains claims statistics on the basis of individual Roads Service Section Office areas. The Ballymena and Larne and Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus Section Office maintenance areas however correspond roughly with District Council areas and, in particular, the variances in respect of Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey are very minor. For this reason, the information in the form requested is not readily available but has been provided below, for each of the last five financial years, in respect of the two Roads Service Section Offices. The figures represent the total costs associated with successful claims ie compensation paid plus all other costs such as legal costs.

TOTAL COST OF COMPENSATION INCLUDING LEGAL AND OTHER COSTS

Personal Injury			
	Carrickfergus £	Larne £	Newtownabbey £
2008/09	238,497.05	11,292.48	254,213.98
2007/08	16,029.76	3,690.40	232,031.05
2006/07	64,271.27	22,054.75	240,603.28
2005/06	69,042.20	54,964.08	107,832.11
2004/05	87,247.81	4,591.25	235,873.47

Laneways in Residential Areas

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to detail his Department's policy on the abandonment of laneways in residential areas; and (ii) for his assessment of the results of community consultation where there is an indication of a shared desire for the closure of laneways and other rights of way.

(AQW 4700/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service's policy and procedures for processing abandonment proposals, including the necessary consultations are contained within its Policy and Procedure Guide: Abandonment and Stopping-up Orders.

A copy of this document has been placed in the Library.

A26 between Glarryford and the Drones Road

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposals to dual part of the A26 between Glarryford and the Drones Road.

(AQW 4704/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is progressing plans for the provision of a 7 km stretch of dual carriageway on the A26, between Glarryford and the A44 Drones Road. This is one of the major projects included in the ten year Investment Delivery Plan for Roads.

In August 2008, I announced the preferred route which closely follows the existing corridor. The route is currently being taken through the final stage of the scheme assessment process. This will culminate in the publication of an Environmental Statement and draft Orders, for planning and land acquisition, which I would anticipate occurring in mid-2011.

It is anticipated that construction will commence in the latter part of the Investment Delivery Plan period.

Belfast to Derry Railway Line

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail a timescale for (i) relaying the Coleraine to Derry section of the Belfast to Derry railway line; (ii) the provision of a loop-line to facilitate an enhanced timetable; (iii) providing a new railway station at Waterside; and (iv) providing new trains to address issues of overcrowding.

(AQW 4764/10)

Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) Translink has already commenced detailed planning and design work for the re-lay of track between Coleraine and Derry. Work on the ground is scheduled to commence in April 2012 and will be completed in 2013 subject to normal approvals and procedures.
- (ii) In answer to points (ii) and (iv), included in the plans for the track re-lay work is the construction of a passing loop between Coleraine and Derry, which is a single line track. In addition, the Department has approved a project to purchase 20 new trains for use on the railways network. This will allow up to 3 additional trains to be deployed on the Derry line which should help to address the issues of overcrowding. The additional trains, coupled with the upgrade of the track and the new passing loop, will allow increased frequencies of services on the line.
- (iii) I am aware that Translink has been in consultation with ILEX on their plans to construct a foot and cycle bridge which could directly link the railway with Foyle side. At this time there are no funded plans available for the construction of a new railway station, however, I will consider any proposals brought forward in light of existing commitments, budget scenarios and long term plans being discussed with Translink. Currently Translink is working with ILEX to ensure that the bridge construction remains fully compatible with plans for a new station in the future if this is approved and proves financially feasible.

As part of a project to upgrade stations and halts across the railways network to comply with Disability Discrimination legislation and Translink's New Rail Vision, work has been completed to provide the existing station with tactile paving, improved lighting and signage, improved toilets and general painting. This was not a major work but cost some £300k.

Dual Carriageway Between Dundonald and Newtownards

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to address the deterioration of the dual carriageway between Dundonald and Newtownards which is causing damage to vehicles.

(AQW 4860/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the A20 dual carriageway between Dundonald and Newtownards forms part of the Trunk Road network and funding for structural maintenance is sought through a separate bidding process to the normal allocation.

I am pleased to advise the Member that Roads Service has secured substantial funds under the Trunk Road bidding process for the 2010/11 financial year. Roads Service now plans to resurface several extensive sections of the A20 dual carriageway between Dundonald and Newtownards during the summer of this year.

I understand that in the period from 2002 to 2008 a series of sections of the Upper Newtownards Road were resurfaced between the Comber Road and Bradshaws Brae. The remaining sections of footway and carriageway along this route will be resurfaced on a priority basis, dependent upon condition and the availability of finance.

Roads Service staff will continue to monitor the condition of the carriageway and carry out interim repairs as required.

Department for Social Development

Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development 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 4247/10)**

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie):

- (i) My Department is responsible for administering the game and game dealer licensing systems and for collecting fees in relation to various gambling licenses. No related goods or services provided can be paid for online.
- (ii) The total number of related transactions processed was:
 - 2009 - 1613
 - 2008 - 1712
 - 2007 - 2055
 - 2006 - 1867
 - 2005 - 1827
- (iii) (a) No payments for these transactions were made on line. Details of the number of payments made by (b) cheque (c) postal order and (d) cash could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.
- (iv) Proportionate percentage of online payments relative to other methods – Nil.

Older People in Debt

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what information is available on the number of older people in debt; and how these figures have changed in the last three years. **(AQW 4280/10)**

Minister for Social Development: The Households Below Average Income (HBAI) publication, which is derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS), currently disseminates information on Pensioners, including information on a number of deprivation indicators, one of which is the numbers of pensioners behind in one or more household bill.

Approximately 4,100 pensioners in 2007/08 indicated they were behind in one or more household bills. This is an increase from approximately 2,800 in 2006/07 and 2,700 in 2005/06.

In 2007/08 30% of pensioners who indicated they were behind in 1 or more household bill were deemed to be in poverty (before housing costs). This figure has increased from 25% in 2006/07 and 10% in 2005/06.

In 2007/08 almost a third of those who indicated they were behind in one or more household bills fell at the bottom of the income scale. This figure has fluctuated over the last three years.

Bloomfield Estate in Bangor: Funding

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development why the Bloomfield estate in Bangor has never been considered for funding under (i) the Small Pockets of Deprivation programme; (ii) the Areas at Risk programme; and (iii) the Neighbourhood Renewal scheme. **(AQW 4285/10)**

Minister for Social Development: The Small Pockets of Deprivation Programme was launched in April 2006 in response to need highlighted through the process of developing and implementing the

Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. A key principle which guided the selection of Neighbourhood Renewal Areas was that “They must be a workable size. The areas must be large enough to allow integrated measures to be developed and to prevent the resources that are available from being spread too thinly between too many Neighbourhoods”. (People and Place: A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, page 28).

The Small Pockets of Deprivation (SPOD) Programme was developed to provide support to those isolated Enumeration Districts which were too small to be established as full Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. Since the Bloomfield estate was not within one of the most deprived districts, it was not eligible for support from the SPOD Programme.

In 2005, the geography for measuring relative deprivation in Northern Ireland changed from wards and Enumeration Districts to Super Output Areas (SOAs) and Output Areas (OAs). Since the population of OAs is very small, typically 200 people, the Department considers that they do not provide a reliable guide to the location of deprived communities and has decided that the SPOD programme should not normally be extended to isolated OAs. Although a small part of the Bloomfield estate (the Balloo Walk area off Ballyree Drive) falls within an OA in the most deprived 10%, it is too small for the whole estate to be designated as a SPOD area.

- (ii) The Bloomfield estate in Bangor has never been nominated for consideration under the Areas at Risk Pilot Programme. Potential areas for inclusion in this programme are sought from my Development Offices and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive who have to provide an evidential basis for inclusion. There will be no further phases announced under this pilot programme.
- (iii) When the Neighborhood Renewal Strategy was launched, it targeted support to the most deprived urban communities. The target areas were based around as those urban wards within the most deprived 10% of wards in Northern Ireland as measured by the ‘Noble’ Multiple Deprivation Measures and those urban Enumeration Districts with the most deprived 10% of districts not already within one of the most deprived wards. The Bloomfield estate did not fall within one of the most deprived wards or Enumeration Districts and was therefore not eligible to be considered as a Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

Bloomfield Estate in Bangor Community Worker

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her plans for the Bloomfield estate community worker when the current funding for the position runs out.

(AQW 4286/10)

Minister for Social Development: Plans for the Bloomfield estate community worker can not be outlined as the Housing Executive has just recently received a funding application from Bloomfield Residents Association for the Bloomfield estate community worker. This is currently being assessed.

Mortgage Access

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to assist people in getting a mortgage, particularly in cases where they are able to provide substantial deposits.

(AQW 4318/10)

Minister for Social Development: Although my Department has had no dealings with the reserved matters relating to 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 home buyers and which will, in turn, help the wider economy.

Ballymena Town Centre Master Plan

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what funding she plans to commit to implement initiatives in the Ballymena town centre Masterplan in (i) 2010/11; and (ii) 2011/12; and to outline the initiatives to which this funding will be directed.

(AQW 4402/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Ballymena masterplan sets out 46 actions which can be delivered over its projected timespan. Detailed budgets have not yet been set for 2010/11 and 2011/12.

Inquiry Into Town Centre Regeneration

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the recommendations in the inquiry into town centre regeneration which relate to Business Improvement Districts; and if she will act on these recommendations.

(AQW 4404/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department fully supports the concept of statutory BID's. DSD is continuing to work with the key stakeholders, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Finance and Personnel, to lay the groundwork for the progression of statutory BID's.

Housing Benefit and Income Support Claims

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development why 'Good Cause' is sufficient support for Housing Benefit claims but insufficient for Income Support claims.

(AQW 4410/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are in fact "good cause" provisions in both Housing Benefit and Income Support. In Income Support where for example a person fails to attend a work focused interview he will not be penalised if he can show "good cause" for not attending the interview.

There is a difference, however, between the two benefits in the treatment of a late claim to the benefit. In relation to a claim for benefit, working age Housing Benefit can be backdated for six months if a claimant has "good cause" for not making the claim earlier. However, a claim for Income Support can be backdated for a lesser period (up to three months) and only if certain prescribed circumstances are met, for example, where the claimant was misinformed by the Department.

The reason for the different limits on backdating is that Housing Benefit is intended to meet very specific accommodation related costs and in some instances, unlike benefits designed to meet general living expenses, such as Income Support, customers may not make it their priority to claim straight away. In addition, those with chaotic lifestyles or in hard to reach vulnerable groups in particular, are less likely to engage with advice workers at an early stage, if at all, and that when they do substantial rent arrears could have been built up. This may lead to eviction and homelessness. Consequently, there is a longer backdating period for those claiming working age Housing Benefit.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many tenants have been evicted from (i) Housing Executive properties; and (ii) Housing Association properties, because of anti-social behaviour, broken down by local government district, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 4427/10)

Minister for Social Development: The tables below gives details of Housing Executive and Housing Association tenants who have been evicted because of anti-social behaviour, broken down by district council area in each of the last five years.

TABLE 1: HOUSING EXECUTIVE TENANTS EVICTED BECAUSE OF ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR.

Council Area	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Belfast	0	3	6	3	4
North Down	0	0	0	1	2
Ards	4	4	1	1	0
Castlereagh	1	0	0	0	1
Lisburn	5	4	3	3	7
Downpatrick	2	1	0	0	4
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne	1	2	1	0	3
Armagh	0	2	1	0	1
Craigavon	1	3	1	3	2
Dungannon	2	2	2	3	0
Fermanagh	2	1	2	5	1
Ballymena	0	0	0	2	1
Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
Newtownabbey	1	0	0	0	3
Carrickfergus	0	1	0	0	1
Larne	0	0	0	0	1
Ballycastle	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0
Coleraine	0	0	0	2	0
Derry	4	1	0	3	3
Limavady	2	3	0	0	2
Magherafelt	0	2	0	0	2
Strabane	0	0	0	0	0
Omagh	0	0	0	5	2
Cookstown	1	0	0	2	3

TABLE 2: HOUSING ASSOCIATION TENANTS WHO HAVE BEEN EVICTED BECAUSE OF ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR.

Council Area	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Belfast	0	4	1	2	6
North Down	0	0	0	0	0
Ards	0	0	0	0	0
Castlereagh	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn	0	0	0	0	1
Downpatrick	0	0	0	0	1
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne	0	0	0	1	0
Armagh	0	1	0	0	0
Craigavon	0	1	0	1	0
Dungannon	0	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	0	0	0	0	0
Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
Newtownabbey	0	0	0	0	0
Carrickfergus	0	0	0	0	0
Larne	0	0	0	0	0
Ballycastle	0	0	1	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0
Coleraine	0	0	0	0	0
Derry	0	0	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0
Strabane	0	1	0	0	0
Omagh	0	0	0	0	0
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0

Housing in Upper Bann

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Social Development how much her Department has invested in housing 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, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 4460/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. In relation to (i) the Housing Executive does not collate information about its maintenance and improvement

schemes by Parliamentary Constituency. However, Table 1 below details the Housing Association Grant approved for social housing for the Upper Bann parliamentary constituency in each of the last three years, based on the housing starts each year. In relation to (ii), (iii) and (iv) Table 2 below details the Housing Association Grant for social housing plus the value of the Housing Executive's maintenance and improvement schemes for the Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown District Office areas for each of the last three years.

TABLE 1: UPPER BANN PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

Year	Housing Association Grant
2006/07	340,291
2007/08	3,536,894
2008/09	6,385,397

TABLE 2: HOUSING EXECUTIVE DISTRICT OFFICE

	Banbridge	Lurgan	Portadown
2006/2007	£3,715,732	£3,567,670	£1,369,123
2007/2008	£4,621,087	£5,650,303	£1,292,000
2008/2009	£2,606,608	£5,878,300	£989,000

Burst Pipes

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the total number of burst pipes reported by Housing Executive tenants since the start of December 2009; (ii) the total number of these incidents where serious damage was caused to property; (iii) the total cost of repairing these burst pipes; and (iv) the total cost of repairing the associated damage.

(AQW 4480/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive received reports of burst pipes to 2,011 properties since the start of December 2009 to 31 January 2010. The total number of incidents involving serious damage has yet to be determined but it is estimated that some 500 properties were affected. The total cost of repairing these burst pipes has not yet been finalised. However, to date £155,000 has been paid and it is estimated that approximately 25% of the works orders have yet to be settled. The total cost of repairing the associated damage has yet to be determined.

Winter Fuel Payment for Cancer Patients

Mr G Adams asked the Minister for Social Development if she has any plans to introduce a winter fuel payment for cancer patients living in fuel poverty.

(AQW 4483/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Winter Fuel Payment scheme provides help to those aged 60 and over. Older people are specifically targeted as they are acknowledged as being more vulnerable to the effects of cold weather during the winter months than other groups. Those people suffering from cancer or any other illness or disability who fall within this age group will benefit from the scheme. There are no plans at present to introduce a Winter Fuel Payment exclusively for cancer patients.

There is a range of social security benefits available to people suffering from illness or disability including Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance.

Footpaths in Housing Executive Areas

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if there is any funding available for joint schemes with the Department for Regional Development for the creation of footpaths in Housing Executive areas.

(AQW 4500/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive does not currently have any plans for joint schemes with the Department for Regional Development for the creation of footpaths in Housing Executive areas. The Department, through the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, has facilitated the provision of environmental improvements, including footway upgrades, in Housing Executive estates in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas where this has been identified a priority within Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans

Queen's Quay Site, Belfast

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to list the companies that have (i) made formal bids to develop; or (ii) expressed an interest in developing the Queen's Quay site in Belfast since 2003.

(AQW 4528/10)

Minister for Social Development: Since 2003 the following companies have (i) made formal bids to develop the Queens Quay site: Sheridan Millennium; ADELA Properties LTD; BLOK Developments; The Carville Group; and Lagan Quays Ltd; (ii) my Department does not hold a record of any other company which has expressed an interest in developing the Queens Quay site since 2003.

Eviction Notices Issued in the Ards District

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many eviction notices were issued in the Ards District in each of the last five years; and how many of these did not result in an eviction.

(AQW 4538/10)

Minister for Social Development: The tables below provides details of Housing Executive and Housing Association tenants who were served with eviction notices in the Ards District in each of the last five years and the number of those that did not result in an eviction:-

TABLE 1: HOUSING EXECUTIVE TENANTS

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Notices served	861	962	1,123	1,164	900
Did not result in eviction	841	943	1,111	1,154	886

TABLE 2: HOUSING ASSOCIATION TENANTS

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Notices served	1	3	2	3	1
Did not result in eviction	0	0	0	0	0

Eviction Notices

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many court issued eviction notices were administered by her Department, in each district, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4540/10)

Minister for Social Development: I assume the Member is referring to Housing Executive districts. The position in each Housing Executive District Office area is detailed in the table below:-

District Office	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
East Belfast	4	3	1
West Belfast	1	2	5
North Belfast	6	2	5
Shankill	3	4	3
South Belfast	1	0	3
Bangor	0	6	4
Newtownards	1	1	2
Castlereagh	1	1	1
Lisburn	7	7	6
Dairy Farm	0	0	1
Downpatrick	4	0	4
Banbridge	0	0	3
Newry	0	1	2
Armagh	0	0	0
Lurgan	2	2	3
Portadown	1	0	0
Dungannon	0	3	0
Fermanagh	1	2	0
Ballymena	0	0	1
Antrim	0	1	3
Newtownabbey 1	0	3	3
Newtownabbey 2	0	5	2
Carrickfergus	6	2	5
Larne	2	0	0
Ballycastle	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0
Coleraine	0	0	3
Waterloo Place	0	0	0
Waterside	0	0	2
Collon Terrace	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0
Magherafelt	1	0	0
Strabane	0	0	0
Omagh	0	2	2
Cookstown	0	0	0

Community Workers in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor: Funding

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact that the delay in certainty on the funding for community workers in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor is having on the area's wellbeing.

(AQW 4547/10)

Minister for Social Development: There has been no delay. The Department is currently assessing an application from the Kilcooley Community Forum for further funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund to cover the costs of a full time community worker and part time administrative officer. A decision made within the next few weeks.

Community Workers in the Bloomfield Estate, Bangor: Funding

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact that the delay in certainty on the funding for community workers in the Bloomfield Estate, Bangor is having on the area's wellbeing.

(AQW 4548/10)

Minister for Social Development: I would refer the Member to the answer I gave recently to AQW 4286/10. The Housing Executive has just received a funding application from Bloomfield Residents Association for the Bloomfield estate community worker which is currently being assessed.

Housing Maintenance Schemes

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development which housing maintenance schemes will benefit from the £6 million investment announced on 21 January 2010 and the value of each scheme.

(AQW 4584/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the schemes by type, name and estimated cost.

Scheme Type	Scheme Name	Estimated Cost (£)
External Cyclical Maintenance	Greystone Park, Mullaghmesh	151,000
	Drumleck	350,000
Revenue Replacement	Movilla Kitchens, Newtownards	283,000
	Shankill/ Wakehurst, Lurgan	407,000
	Markethill, Armagh	533,000
	Mossley Mallusk, Newtownabbey	634,000
	Suffolk Phase 2, Belfast	302,000
	Ballybone Phase 3, Belfast	316,000
	Jubilee Kitchens, Lisburn	100,000
	Bowtown 1988/89 Kitchens	122,000
	Fallowlea/ Millpath/ Desmond	278,000
Heating	Newpark, Antrim	331,000
	Currynierin Waterside, Derry	401,000
	Elmfield/ Manor/ Ligoniel, Belfast	706,000
	Flying Horse/ Model Farm	380,000
	Lisnaskea, Fermanagh	433,000
	Ardowen, Lurgan	465,000

Pension Credit

Mr B Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development if the ownership of land or property, from which the owner derives no income or monies, affects a Pension Credit application.

(AQW 4630/10)

Minister for Social Development: Since Pension Credit is a means tested benefit, any property or land which a person owns may affect a claim for Pension Credit. The property that a person normally lives in is ignored for as long as they continue to live there. The value of other property or land (where it exceeds £10, 000) from which the owner derives no income will normally affect a claim.

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

Mr D McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development if she plans to make a bid in the next in-year monitoring round to fund the proposed mortgage rescue scheme.

(AQO 747/10)

Minister for Social Development: In the New Housing Agenda, which I launched in February 2008, I stated that I would develop proposals for a mortgage rescue scheme; this work was duly completed. I made an initial bid for funding in respect of a Mortgage Rescue Scheme of £5 million in the June 2008 monitoring round and have made bids at subsequent monitoring rounds to enable a scheme to be introduced. To date, none of those bids have been met. Unfortunately, therefore, I do not have the funding to allow me to launch the financial-rescue element of a mortgage scheme. I will not raise the expectations of people who are struggling to stay on the housing ladder when I simply do not have the budget to provide the kind of financial assistance that is required. However, I will continue to make bids in future monitoring rounds, to enable me to launch the financial-rescue element of the mortgage rescue scheme.

Although the final quarterly figures for last year have yet to be published it appears that the number of actions for repossession has almost doubled between 2007 and 2009; this indicates the need for a full rescue scheme.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Translation System for Irish

Mr B McElduff asked the Assembly Commission if he will introduce head-set equipment to facilitate a simultaneous translation system for Irish in the Assembly chamber for all members.

(AQW 4417/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson): The Assembly Commission is currently considering the development of a language policy for the Northern Ireland Assembly and will consider translation services throughout the organisation as part of this work.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 26 February 2010

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels 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 hotel rooms, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 3841/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Table 1 below details how much the department has spent on unused hotel rooms in each of the last five financial years, and the corresponding number of nights:

TABLE 1

Description	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Number of unused hotel rooms (nights)	1	1	0	0	13
Costs of unused hotel rooms	£72	£75	£0	£0	£2,096

The figures for 2008/09 include costs for accommodation in the US for the First Minister's and deputy First Minister's visit which was cut short in the aftermath of the killings at Masserene and Lurgan in March 2009.

Community Relations in Coleraine

Mr G Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they plan to take to improve community relations in the Killowen and Heights areas of Coleraine over the next six months.
(AQO 788/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Officials in the Community Relations Unit have been liaising with Coleraine Borough Council staff in identifying steps to improve community relations within the Coleraine Borough Council area.

In response, officials have received a working draft of a proposed Community Cohesion Strategy for the Borough Council area. The draft is the subject of ongoing discussion and may inform some additions to the Council's action plan.

Officials will continue to work closely with Coleraine Borough Council to identify how best the Department can support the Council's plans to address sectarian divisions in the area.

We will consider advice from officials on funding the various actions through the District Council Good Relations Programme.

Victims Funding

Mr A Bresland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what additional funding has been provided for victims since devolution in May 2007.

(AQO 789/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: In January 2008 we announced a total of £36 million over 3 years to support victims and survivors. That figure was more than double than made available over the previous three years.

Single Equality Bill

Ms M Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of a Single Equality Bill.

(AQO 790/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Although no policy decisions have been taken with regard to a Single Equality Bill, we continue to legislate in order to provide legal protection against discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Supply Chain Development Branch

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain the reasons for proposals to axe the Supply Chain Development Branch, which includes the Rural Enterprise Advisers who deliver front-line services to farmers and the rural community.

(AQW 4652/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): DARD, like all other Departments, is required to make savings to enable the Executive to work within its budget as well as enable it to address 2010/11 pressures in a strategic manner. My budget proposals to make these savings were presented to the ARD Committee on Tuesday 26 January as well as being made public. These proposals include one relating to making savings through a review of Rural Enterprise work, on the basis that this work does not directly contribute to either Programme for Government (PfG) or Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets. At this stage I have not made any firm decisions and this position will remain, pending the outcome of the consultation process outlined in the Review of 2010-11 Spending Plans for NI Departments.

Single Farm Payment Process

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 3790/10, for her assessment of whether the External Panel that judged in favour of the South Down appellant was fully aware of the EU Regulations pertaining to the Single Farm Payment process.

(AQW 4681/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The External Panel that recommended that the case of the South Down appellant should be upheld would have been fully aware of the EU Regulations pertaining to the case. In line with my Department's procedures, the relevant legislative references and extracts are included in the Case Officer's report that is sent to both the applicant and the Panel Members.

Single Farm Payment

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Single Farm Payment tribunal decisions which (i) found in favour of; and (ii) found against the appealing landowners she has reversed.

(AQW 4682/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As stated previously, the Single Farm Payment External Panel does not make decisions. They make recommendations and these are not binding on my Department. In making the final decision, I and my Department have to consider the Panel recommendation against the relevant EU Rules and Regulations. My role is to ensure that all the facts of the case have been considered, I have no discretion to operate outside the EU Rules and Regulations.

I and my Department have not accepted the Panel's recommendation in 8 of a total of 135 cases, as follows:

- (i) In 5 cases the External Panel recommended that the applicants' review be upheld. These recommendations were not accepted.
- (ii) In one case the External Panel recommended that the applicant's review be upheld in part. This recommendation was not accepted.
- (iii) In one case the External Panel could not agree a recommendation. This review was not upheld.
- (iv) In one case the External Panel recommended the applicant's review should not be upheld. This recommendation was not accepted and the review was subsequently upheld in part.
- (v) In all 8 cases, the farm businesses involved claimed Single Farm Payment on land which they own or take in conacre or lease.

Loss of Potato Crops

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an estimate of (i) the tonnage of potatoes lost as a result of the severe weather in December 2009 and January 2010; and (ii) the financial loss of income to growers as a result.

(AQW 4683/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am well aware that the recent severe weather has caused great difficulty to the farming community; however, without any formal assessment, DARD has no statistics on the extent of the crop damage or consequential financial loss caused by the recent severe weather.

At the recent meeting, Executive colleagues have recognised the damage caused to some potato and vegetable crops by the recent severe frost and have agreed that I meet with the DFP Minister to discuss hardship funding. Subsequent to this Executive meeting I have instructed DARD officials to undertake an assessment of the damage caused to potato and vegetable crops by the severe frost in January 2010.

The damage assessment exercise will inform any future financial support consideration, subject to funding and the need to comply with EU State Aid rules.

Boats Purchased by the Loughs Agency

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much the Loughs Agency spent on purchasing boats in each of the last three years; and how many of these boats were sourced from outside the UK.

(AQW 4723/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Loughs Agency purchased eight boats, two of which were purchased outside Britain. A summary of costs is provided below.

Date of Purchase	Description	Amount	Country of Purchase
03/05/07	Funyak Coraleen	£495.00	UK
07/02/08	Yamaha Zodiac Inflatable	£794.99	UK
16/05/08	Funyak Coraleen	£495.00	UK

Date of Purchase	Description	Amount	Country of Purchase
June 2008	MMV Ostrea	£810, 000 - £820,000 cost including refit (*see note below)	New Zealand
17/12/08	Nomad Canoe	£621.03	Ireland
28/05/09	Inflatable Kayak	£89.29	UK
26/08/09	Venture Canoe	£910.00	UK
01/10/09	Venture Canoe	£910.00	UK
	Total	£814,315.31 to £824,315.31	

* Costs of purchase of this vessel was around £295k. Some issues relating to the refit are still under negotiation. However, the total cost, including refit, the electronics package, shipping to Britain and the north of Ireland, professional fees and all expenses, is between £810k - £820k

Public Relations Services

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department has spent on public relations services from (i) PriceWaterhouseCoopers; (ii) KPMG; (iii) Deloitte; and (iv) Weber Shandwick since May 2007.

(AQW 4851/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has not incurred any expenditure on public relations services from (i) PriceWaterhouseCoopers; (ii) KPMG; (iii) Deloitte; and (iv) Weber Shandwick since May 2007.

Farm Modernisation Scheme: Manure Efficiency Technology Sub-programme

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 4579/10, if she has any plans to roll out a second tranche of the Manure Efficiency Technology Sub-programme, given the high number of applicants for the first tranche and the underspend resulting from 59 of the approvals not being taken up.

(AQW 4864/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Whilst there were a high number of applicants to the Manure Efficiency Technology Sub Programme (METS) in the first tranche of the Farm Modernisation Programme (FMP), the actual uptake of financial support by those awarded grant has been disappointing. The latest figures suggest that approximately 50% of those farmers made an award under METS will not be proceeding with their investment. The experience of the first tranche of funding therefore suggests that whilst there is considerable interest in advanced slurry spreading technologies, many farmers are reluctant to make a substantial investment in this type of equipment in the current economic climate, despite the generous support that was made available.

At this time of economic downturn it is essential that hard pressed budgets are not committed to projects that do not deliver spend on the ground, consequently I will consider the merits and affordability of METS before committing funding towards a further tranche of this scheme.

Herring Fishing

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has held any discussions with the relevant fishing organisations to allow herring fishing to take place at night to ensure the maximum amount of fish can be caught.

(AQW 4881/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are no restrictions on the time of day during which herring may be fished.

Portavogie Harbour

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what improvements are planned for Portavogie Harbour in this financial year.

(AQW 4882/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The NI Fishery Harbour Authority carried out routine maintenance works including repairs to the quay edges and mechanical repairs to the slipway during this financial year. Plans for the next two years include Phase 2 repairs to the inner harbour quay walls and upgrade works to the outer pier. NIFHA will also be examining options for a small vessel pontoon facility in the inner harbour similar in style to the Kilkeel harbour facility. In addition NIFHA have been working closely with NI Water to accommodate a pumping station on the harbour which is vital to the overall upgrade works for waste/sewerage water in the Ards Peninsula and whilst not directly connected to harbour works, this will result in a major improvement in the quality of effluent water from the south side of the harbour and this work is regarded as essential for the industry and the Portavogie community.

Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of (i) the adequacy of the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973 in providing a legislative basis to deal with undesignated waterways, particularly in urban areas; and (i) whether these now pose a significant threat to property and land in towns and cities.

(AQW 4895/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) I am confident that the provisions under the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 are adequate for the handling of undesignated watercourses in both urban and rural settings. The legislation allows for applications to be made to the Drainage Council for the north of Ireland for designation of watercourses, whilst also affording my Department the ability to take enforcement action to ensure that maintenance work is carried out on undesignated watercourses to ensure the free flow. However it is not always possible to justify works or maintenance to address flooding problems related to garden or road flooding.
- (ii) Any watercourse that, after proper evaluation, is shown to pose a significant flood risk to people and property is subject to flood alleviation works and, where appropriate, is designated for future maintenance to ensure the free flow.

Equestrian Industry

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the handling of the case of the dead and starving horses found at a farm near Gilford, County Armagh in January 2010; and to outline any measures her Department intends to introduce to assist the equestrian industry at this time.

(AQW 4947/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The PSNI is responsible for enforcing the 1972 Welfare of Animals Act with regard to non-farm animals including horses. The PSNI is leading the prosecution with support from the USPCA, who were closely involved with this case.

The department currently has no plans for new initiatives to financially support the equine industry.

Fishermen

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what she is doing to enable fishermen who are currently unemployed, to gain employment in the fishing industry; and if she has considered opening an advice centre for fishermen, similar to the one in Glasgow.

(AQW 4951/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The fishing industry is telling me that it is having difficulty getting crews and as a consequence is having to recruit suitably skilled people from overseas. This suggests that those unemployed fishermen to whom you refer are no longer interested in the employment opportunities that are available in the industry. I have no plans to open an advice centre for unemployed fishermen. Locally, it is the Department for Employment and Learning that has responsibility for providing advice and guidance to jobseekers. Jobs & Benefits offices/JobCentres are able to provide further advice on the range of financial help and services available.

Renewable Energy by Anaerobic Digestion

Mr B Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what (i) financial assistance; and (ii) technical assistance her Department can offer farmers who wish to utilise farm waste products to produce renewable energy by the process of anaerobic digestion.

(AQW 5015/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Following receipt of a report from the Agriculture Stakeholder Forum on Renewable Energy, I am carrying out a review of my Department's renewable energy policy. I expect to be able to publish the outcome of this review in May 2010.

Renewable Energy technologies, including anaerobic digestion (AD) systems, can require substantial capital investment. We have secured EC State Aid approval to implement a Biomass Processing Challenge Fund, which we plan to open in summer 2010, subject to remaining approvals being in place. The objective of the Fund, which will be part financed through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), is to encourage investment in a range of Renewable Energy technologies, at farm level, including AD.

There is an extensive research programme at AFBI Hillsborough on the AD of livestock manures using a farm-scale digester. This research programme is generating important data to inform the local agri-food industry and Government on the relative merits of AD. Approximately 1,000 people have visited the AD facility in the past year.

During February 2010, CAFRE delivered an 'Introduction to Renewable Energy in the Farming Sector' workshop to 130 farmers/growers across 6 locations. The workshop included coverage of AD technologies suitable for adoption within a farm business. A further 4 workshops are scheduled for March.

To date 16 participants in these workshops have expressed interest in AD and CAFRE will develop and deliver a further course specific to AD during 2010.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Elite Olympic Sports Facilities

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he will make a decision about elite Olympic sports facilities.

(AQW 4565/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): The Elite Facilities Programme competition is being run by Sport NI on behalf of my Department. I have been informed that Sport NI will shortly announce the provisional preferred bidders for the programme, selected on the basis of criteria agreed at its launch.

Preferred bidders will then be asked to take forward completion of their Outline Business Cases. These will be assessed against factors such as value for money, viability and need.

Following the assessment of final Outline Business Cases by Sport NI, then by DCAL and finally by DFP, I will be in a position to announce, subject to affordability, which applications have been successful. These will then move forward to design and development stage.

London 2012 Olympics

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what he is doing to ensure that Northern Ireland receives a fair share of funding designated for the 2012 Olympics.

(AQW 4650/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Government Olympic Executive in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) leads for Government on delivery of the London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games and is responsible for managing central Government funding; this includes the diversion of the £42m lottery monies to fund the infrastructure associated with the Games.

My Department is represented on the Nations and Regions Group of the London2012 Organising Committee for the Games where opportunities for how Northern Ireland can participate in and benefit from the Games is actively pursued. This has included securing £1.31m funding from Legacy Trust UK in support of Northern Ireland's 2012 legacy, and funding for a 2012 Inspire Programmer post.

I will continue to work with key stakeholders within existing 2012 structures in NI to ensure a sustainable legacy from the Games.

London 2012 Olympics

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has had any discussions with the Big Lottery Fund to consider whether the £42m of funding redirected from Northern Ireland to the London Olympics can be used to upgrade sports training facilities here for use by competitors.

(AQW 4674/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The National Lottery is a reserved matter and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has overall UK responsibility for the Lottery.

Sport Northern Ireland, rather than the Big Lottery Fund, is the Lottery distributor for sport in Northern Ireland. Sport Northern Ireland will transfer approximately £4.1m over the period 2009- 2010.

While I continue to support the 2012 Olympic Games, I am concerned about the impact this decrease in funds will have on sport. My Department will be making bids for funding, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, to support the development of sport in Northern Ireland. These bids will seek to take account of reductions of funding resulting from prioritisation of lottery spending on the London Olympics.

Libraries NI

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) how many staff applied to continue working for Libraries NI after they reach 65 years of age; (ii) how many were unsuccessful; (iii) what posts they held; and (iv) the reasons why their applications were unsuccessful.

(AQW 4735/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: 12 staff have applied to continue working for Libraries NI after they reached the age of 65 years (Includes 4 applications made prior to April 2009 through the Education and Library Boards).

From these 12, only 1 employee was unsuccessful in their initial request. However 9 of the employees who had been granted extensions made subsequent applications for further extensions (beyond 31 March 2010) and all of these further applications were unsuccessful.

The posts held by those 12 employees were as follows;

- 5 Library Assistants
- 1 Building Supervisor
- 1 Cleaner
- 1 Library Attendant
- 1 Senior Librarian
- 2 Branch Library Managers
- 1 Technician

Requests to continue working beyond the age of 65 were refused because the applications did not meet the business needs of Libraries NI.

Irish and Local History Studies Library in Armagh

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the service currently available at the Irish and Local History Studies Library in Armagh; and if he has any plans to change this service. **(AQW 4736/10)**

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Irish and Local Studies Library in Armagh provides a wide range of local history reference material that members of the public can access freely. Facilities at the library include computers, photocopiers, microfilm readers and study space.

The library hosts events promoting its collections and local history and staff work closely with other local libraries and heritage institutions in Armagh.

Libraries NI have no plans for any changes to the Irish and Local Studies Library in Armagh at present but plan to conduct a Strategic Review of all services provided outside Greater Belfast in the near future.

Maze Site: National Stadium Project

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department has paid to date for consultants in relation to the National Stadium project at the Maze. **(AQW 4825/10)**

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My department spent a total of £3,599,278 in relation to consultants' involvement in the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze.

Public Relations Services

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department has spent on public relations services provided by Weber Shandwick since May 2007. **(AQW 4918/10)**

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department has incurred no expenditure on public relations services provided by Weber Shandwick since May 2007.

World Police and Fire Games 2013

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken to date to ensure that the infrastructure will be in place to make the 2013 World Police and Fire Games a success. **(AQW 4965/10)**

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A Business Case which includes a recommended delivery mechanism for implementing the 2013 World Police and Fire Games – Belfast has been commissioned and this has been referred to DFP for approval.

A Stakeholder group incorporating all the key stakeholders Police Service for Northern Ireland, N I Prison Service, N I Fire and Rescue Service, DCAL and Belfast City Council has been established. The Group has identified and taken forward preparatory work on various workstreams groups including Volunteering, Tourism, Legacy and Transport and Logistics to take forward the planning and organisation of the Games in conjunction with relevant external bodies.

The organisation of the 2013 WPFG sports workstream is being taken forward by Sport Northern Ireland who are identifying the sports to be included, the structures for the competitions and potential suitable venues.

Re-imaging Communities Project

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to roll out a Re-imaging Communities project in the Bloomfield Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 4967/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Re-Imaging Communities programme is delivered by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and decisions on the allocation of funding are taken by the Shared Communities Consortium.

The programme is principally aimed at District Councils and is also open to constituted community and voluntary organisations.

To date, the programme has not received any enquiries of interest for Bloomfield Estate, Bangor.

Equality Impact Assessments

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures are included within Equality Impact Assessments conducted by his Department to ensure that the interests of people with identities outside the two perceived main traditions in Northern Ireland are taken into account.

(AQW 4970/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: When conducting an Equality Impact Assessment, my Department adheres to The Guide to Statutory Duties, issued by the Equality Commission, which outlines the statutory arrangements under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

This mechanism allows policies to be assessed in order to determine whether they have an adverse impact on equality of opportunity for the nine Section 75 categories. The relevant categories include persons of religious belief, persons of different racial group and persons of different political opinion.

Department of Education

SparkleBox

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education how many users in Northern Ireland accessed the Sparklebox website in the last 12 months.

(AQW 4643/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Tá ordaithe agam do Barry Mulholland, Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair, ar a bhfuil C2k ina stiúrthóireacht, iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar bhainistiú C2k den chás seo.

I have instructed Barry Mulholland, Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board, of which C2k is a directorate, to conduct an investigation into C2k's handling of this case.

The Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board has been instructed to report to the Department of Education by 24 March 2010. Information regarding usage of Sparklebox by schools will be part of this investigation. I will revert to the Assembly on this matter at the earliest opportunity.

Scheduled Maintenance Work and Newbuilds for Schools

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) maintenance work; and (ii) new builds scheduled for schools in the East Antrim constituency, in each of the next three years.

(AQW 4691/10)

Minister of Education: Tá mé ag breathnú ar roghanna chun na coigiltí atá riachtanach ón bhuiséad oideachais sa bhliain 2010/11 a sholáthar agus chun déileáil le brúnna oideachais. Ní féidir, mar sin, oibreacha sceidealaithe do scoileanna a mhionsonrú ag an chéim seo. D'iarr mé ar m'fheidhmeannaigh measúnú comhionannais a dhéanamh ar gach réimse atá faoi bhreathnú i leith laghdaithe agus ní dhéanfaidh mé aon chinneadh go dtí go bhfeicfidh mé toradh na hoibre seo.

I am currently considering options for delivering savings required in 2010/11 from the education budget and to address education pressures. It is therefore not possible at this stage to detail scheduled works for schools. I have asked my officials to carry out an equality assessment on each of the areas under consideration for reduction and I will not make any decisions until I have seen the outcome of this work.

Retired Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education whether her Department will continue to advise schools and colleges of the employment of teachers who have retired or taken premature retirement when they are seeking to fill temporary vacancies.

(AQW 4694/10)

Minister of Education: Seo a leanas líon na múinteoirí a d'éirigh as an mhúinteoireacht agus ar athfhostaíodh iad i bpobail áitiúla foghlama, i bpost múinteoireachta sealadach nó páirt-aimseartha:

The number of teachers who have retired over the last five years and subsequently become re-employed in local learning communities, in a temporary or part-time teaching position is as follows:

Financial Year	Total Number of Retired Teachers	Total Number of retired teachers who were re-employed in 2009/2010	Number of Prematurely Retired Teachers	Number of Prematurely retired teachers who were re-employed in 2009/2010
2005/06	1032	114	613	100
2006/07	1095	134	588	93
2007/08	1076	183	603	160
2008/09	961	121	504	87

Note: Figures for 2009/10 are not available.

The Department's Teachers' Pay & Pensions' Team supplies employers with information on the instances of reemployment in their respective areas and repeatedly advises employers of their responsibilities on re-employment, i.e. retired teachers should only be re-employed to provide short-term cover where newly qualified teachers or experienced non-retired teachers are unavailable.

Retired Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education (i) how many (a) retired teachers; or (b) prematurely retired teachers are involved in local learning communities; and (ii) whether her Department is advising

local learning community groups of the employment of teachers who have retired or taken premature retirement when they are seeking to fill vacancies.

(AQW 4695/10)

Minister of Education: Seo a leanas líon na múinteoirí a d'éirigh as an mhúinteoireacht agus ar athfhostaíodh iad i bpobail áitiúla foghlama, i bpost múinteoireachta sealadach nó páirt-aimseartha:

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Schools: Governance Status

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education to confirm if her Department is currently reviewing, or has any plans to review, how the existing management or governance status of schools is defined, altered or changed.

(AQW 4710/10)

Minister of Education: My Department has reviewed the existing management or governance status of grant-aided schools in the context of the Review of Public Administration.

The Education Bill provides for some minor changes to the constitution of school Boards of Governors to take account of the establishment of the ESA. Under Clause 35 of the Bill, ESA, as the funding authority of all grant-aided schools, will take on responsibility for the recruitment and appointment of DE and ELB governors who will then be renamed community governors. Several amendments have been tabled to Clause 35. These include a change to the definition of community governors to include the community served by the school and a provision that their appointment should follow consultation with the relevant Board of Governors. I am content to support both amendments at Consideration Stage of the Bill. However, I am still awaiting Executive agreement on the amendments on the amendments which I am proposing to move or support at Consideration Stage.

Cinnteadh an Bille Oideachais (Uimh. 2) go bhfuil gach scoil rialaithe faoi smacht agus bainistíocht a Boird Ghobharnóirí. Is é is aidhm dó ná gach Bord Gobharnóirí scoile a chur i seasamh inchomparáide i dtaca le socrúithe bainistíochta scoile.

The Education (No 2) Bill will provide for each controlled school to be under the control and management of its Board of Governors. This is designed to place all school Boards of Governors on a comparable position with regard to school management arrangements.

The mechanisms by which the governance and management arrangements of a school can be changed are:

- by means of a School Development Proposal under Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986;
- by the transfer of a voluntary school to controlled status under Article 17 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986;
- by the initiation of procedures for the acquisition of grant maintained integrated status under Articles 69 to 78 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989;
- by the initiation of procedures for the acquisition of controlled integrated status under Articles 91 to 99 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989;
- by the establishment of a new controlled, voluntary or independent school in the premises of a former grant maintained integrated school under Article 83 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989.

New Capital Builds

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Education how much has been allocated for new capital builds in each Education and Library Board area in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4712/10)

Minister of Education: Seo a leanas na méideanna a leithdháileadh le haghaidh tógálacha nua i ngach ceantar Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne i ngach bliain de na trí bliana a chuaigh thart:

Amounts allocated for new builds in each Education and Library Board area in each of the last three years were as follows:

Board Area	2006/07 (£000s)	2007/08 (£000s)	2008/09 (£000s)
BELB	12,232	15,837	11,275
WELB	23,360	15,962	41,626
NEELB	12,743	8,130	5,511
SEELB	8,961	30,449	43,004
SELB	14,867	19,367	21,620

Entitlement Framework

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what percentage of schools currently deliver the requirements of the Entitlement Framework.

(AQW 4749/10)

Minister of Education: Beidh an Creat iomlán Teidlíochta ina cheanglas reachtúil ón bhliain 2013. Ón dáta sin, ní mór do theacht ar réimse cúrsaí atá níos leithne agus níos cothroime a bheith ag gach duine óg. Cúrsaí a mbeidh suim ag na daoine óg iontu; cúrsaí a bheidh ábhartha dóibh; cúrsaí a chuideoidh leo chun slíthe beatha sásúla a bhaint amach.

The full Entitlement Framework will be a statutory requirement from 2013. From that date, all our young people must have access to a broader, better balanced range of courses. Courses that interest them; that they see as relevant; that will lead to fulfilling careers.

My Department is currently reviewing progress of every Post Primary schools towards full delivery of the Entitlement Framework and the Inspectorate will ensure, from now on, that all inspections in post-primary schools include a focus on the offer available to pupils at 14 and as they prepare to enter sixth form – and a particular focus on the coherence of what is available and the careers education and guidance that is available to help pupils make meaningful choices.

The 2008/09 Entitlement Framework Audit Report is available and represents progress over the first two years of the Entitlement Framework and shows that at Key Stage 4, 21% of post-primary schools offered access to a minimum of 24 courses, of which at least one third were applied courses.

At Post 16, 9.3% of all post-primary schools offered access to a minimum of 27 courses, of which at least one third were applied courses.

Educational Underachievement

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education (i) what strategies are currently in place to address the comparative educational underachievement of children from the most deprived areas; and (ii) if there are any future strategies planned to address this issue.

(AQW 4763/10)

Minister of Education: 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 literacy and maths. Too often, underachievement is related to socio-economic disadvantage and is compounded by poverty of aspiration. My focus is on tackling underachievement wherever it exists and improving outcomes for all our young people.

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 put an end to these detrimental impacts, particularly on our most disadvantaged young people.

Chomh maith le hAistriú 2010, tá mé ag cur i bhfeidhm creat de bheartais idircheangáilte lena chinntiú go mbaineann gach páiste a chumas amach. Tá an curaclam athbhreithnithe i bhfeidhm do gach bliainghrúpa ó bhonnbhliain go hEochairchéim 4; Sheol mé 'Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith- Beartas um Fheabhsú Scoileanna' ar 30 Aibreán 2009; tá na cláir 'Ag Baint Amach i nDoire' agus 'Ag Baint Amach i mBéal Feirste' dírithe ar dhul i nleic le tearcghnóthachtáil i gceantair faoi ard-mhíbhuntáiste socheachnamaíoch. Cuimsíonn bearta atá le teacht an straitéis um litearthacht agus uimhearthacht, an beartas um riachtanais oideachais speisialta agus chuimsiú, straitéis luath-bhlianta agus bunú an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna.

As well as Transfer 2010, I am putting in place a jigsaw of interconnected policies aimed at ensuring every child fulfils her or his potential. The revised curriculum is now in place for all year groups from foundation to Key Stage 4; I launched 'Every School a Good School – a Policy for School Improvement' on 30 April 2009; the Achieving Derry and Achieving Belfast programmes are aimed at tackling underachievement in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage. Forthcoming measures include the literacy and numeracy strategy, the special educational needs and inclusion policy, an early years strategy and the establishment of the ESA.

Extended Schools Programme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education for her Department's assessment of the Extended Schools programme.

(AQW 4769/10)

Minister of Education: Is iad na scoileanna aonair agus Comhordaitheoir Scoile Seirbhísí Breise na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (BOLanna) a dhéanann monatóireacht agus measúnú ar imeachtaí Scoile Seirbhísí Breise, agus rinneadh tuairiscí measúnaithe ag an Chigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna (COO).

Monitoring and evaluation of Extended School activities is carried out by individual schools, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) Extended School Co-ordinator and evaluation reports have also been completed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

Reports from schools and ELBs suggest the programme is proving beneficial by helping remove barriers to learning by helping children become ready to learn, motivating and supporting them to achieve their full potential and also increasing the value placed on education by parents and the wider community. The ETI report in October 2008 updates an initial evaluation published in November 2006 and records considerable progress both in the schools and in the ELBs supporting the schools to deliver the aims of the programme. I remain committed to narrowing the gap in achievement levels across the North and improving the life chances of all children and young people.

Extended Schools Programme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has spent on the Extended Schools programme in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4771/10)

Minister of Education: Mionsonraíonn an tábla atá iniata an maoiniú a leithdháil an Roinn Oideachais do chlár na Scoileanna Sínithe i ngach bliain de na trí bliana airgeadais a chuaigh thart:

The attached table details the Extended Schools funding allocated by the Department of Education in each of the last three financial years:

2007/08 (£000s)	2008/09 (£000s)	2009/10 (£000s)
14,208*	11,075	9,884

* includes £3.638m carry over from 2006/07

Newbuilds for Schools in East Belfast

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education to detail the programme of new builds for schools in the East Belfast constituency for (i) 2010/11; (ii) 2011/12; and (iii) 2012/13.

(AQW 4786/10)

Minister of Education: Construction work is currently underway to provide new school buildings for Grosvenor G.S. and Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock, with work due to be completed in April 2010 and April 2011 respectively.

Is riachtanach a chinntiú go bhfuil an t-infheistiú san earnáil oideachais i gcomhréir leis an chreat beartais atá á chur i bhfeidhm agam. Ar 15 Deireadh Fómhair 2009, d'fhógair mé athbhreithniú ar gach tionscadal caipitil lena dhearbhu go bhfuil siad go léir i gcomhréir leis an chreat beartais agus, mar sin, go mbeidh siad inmharthana san fhádtéarma. Cinnteoidh an t-athbhreithniú seo go n-úsáidtear gach acmhainn atá ar fáil chun na torthaí is fearr do pháistí agus an luach is fearr don cháiníocóir a bhaint amach.

It is necessary to ensure that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place. On 15 October 2009 I announced a review of all capital projects to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term. This review will ensure that available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for the taxpayer.

Until the that review is completed I will not in a position to state which, if any new builds will take place in East Belfast in 2010/11, 2011/12 or 2012/13

Free School Meals

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail the number and percentage of children entitled to free school meals (a) who enrolled in the first year of a grammar school in each of the last five years; (b) who have obtained the necessary marks to enter a grammar school in the recent transfer tests; and (ii) whether she intends to bring these figures to the Assembly.

(AQW 4791/10)

Minister of Education: Tá sé socraithe agam go gcuirfear i Leabharlann an Tionóil an t-eolas a iarradh ar líon na bpáistí agus céadatan na bpáistí atá i dteideal béilí saora scoile agus a chláraigh sa chéad bhliain ar scoil ghramádaí i ngach bliain de na cúig bliana a chuiagh thart.

I have arranged to have the information requested about the number and percentage of children entitled to free school meals who enrolled in the first year of a grammar school in each of the last five years to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Information about the number and percentage of children entitled to receive free school meals who are admitted to grammar schools in September 2010 will be collected as part of the next school census in October 2010.

Funding for Preparatory Preschools

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Education if her proposal to withdraw funding for preparatory pre-schools requires Executive approval.

(AQW 4793/10)

Minister of Education: The Independent Strategic Review of Education (known as the Bain Report), published in December 2006, highlighted the issue of the funding of Preparatory Schools. In respect of the allocation of the education budget, it stated:

“Equity must continue to be at the heart of this distribution. For this reason, the part-funding of fee-charging preparatory departments in grammar schools is anomalous. This aspect of delegation subsidises provision that can only be accessed by children whose parents can pay the requisite fee. This would seem to be an inequitable use of public funds and counterintuitive in a funding system simultaneously managing the pressures of a high level of surplus capacity. The rationale for this aspect of schools-related current expenditure should be reviewed and its continuation considered with regard to equity and in the context of the significant pressures on the education budget”.

One of the key recommendations of the Bain Report (recommendation 5) was that:

“The rationale for funding preparatory departments in grammar schools should be reviewed”.

The Equality Commission has adopted a position where it considers that a key component of a quality education system is the provision of equality of access to good education. In relation to its position on the funding of Preparatory Departments, the Commission has stated that:

“Preparatory Departments inherently do not provide equality of access as attendance is dependant on a parents /families ability to pay additional substantial costs. We do not believe a public subvention to this sector is the best possible use of public funds when there are other areas that we have prioritised for intervention in the above document”. (“Above document” refers to Every Child an Equal Child)

I gcomhréir leis an mholadh seo, thug mo Roinn údarás don Roinn Airgeadais agus Pearsanra chun athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar mhaoiniú do ranna ullmhúcháin scoileanna gramadaí agus chun tuairisc ar na torthaí a sholáthar don Roinn.

In line with this recommendation my Department commissioned the Department of Finance and Personnel to undertake a review of funding to preparatory departments of grammar schools and to provide a report on their findings to the Department.

The report concludes that the Department should consider the withdrawal of funding to preparatory departments on the basis of equality of access.

I have accepted the main findings in the report and have indicated that the recommendation to withdraw funding from preparatory departments should be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment before a final decision on implementation is taken.

The draft Equality Impact Assessment went out for consultation on 7 January 2010 and the deadline for responses is 4 March 2010.

The proposal to withdraw funding from preparatory departments of grammar schools does not require Executive approval as it does not fall under the list of duties as outlined in section 2.4 of the Ministerial Code.

Funding for Preparatory Preschools

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Education if her proposal to withdraw funding for preparatory pre-schools will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment before any final decision.

(AQW 4794/10)

Minister of Education: The Independent Strategic Review of Education (known as the Bain Report), published in December 2006, highlighted the issue of the funding of Preparatory Schools. In respect of the allocation of the education budget, it stated:

“Equity must continue to be at the heart of this distribution. For this reason, the part-funding of fee-charging preparatory departments in grammar schools is anomalous. This aspect of delegation subsidises provision that can only be accessed by children whose parents can pay the requisite fee. This would seem to be an inequitable use of public funds and counterintuitive in a funding system simultaneously managing the pressures of a high level of surplus capacity. The rationale for this aspect of schools-related current expenditure should be reviewed and its continuation considered with regard to equity and in the context of the significant pressures on the education budget”.

One of the key recommendations of the Bain Report (recommendation 5) was that:

“The rationale for funding preparatory departments in grammar schools should be reviewed”.

The Equality Commission has adopted a position where it considers that a key component of a quality education system is the provision of equality of access to good education. In relation to its position on the funding of Preparatory Departments, the Commission has stated that:

“Preparatory Departments inherently do not provide equality of access as attendance is dependant on a parents /families ability to pay additional substantial costs. We do not believe a public subvention to this sector is the best possible use of public funds when there are other areas that we have prioritised for intervention in the above document”. (“Above document” refers to Every Child an Equal Child)

In line with this recommendation my Department commissioned the Department of Finance and Personnel's, Business Consultancy Service, to undertake a review of funding to preparatory departments of grammar schools and to provide a report on their findings to the Department.

The report concludes that the Department should consider the withdrawal of funding to preparatory departments on the basis of equality of access

I have accepted the main findings in the report and have indicated that the recommendation to withdraw funding from preparatory departments should be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment before a final decision on implementation is taken.

Cuireadh an dréacht-Mheasúnacht Tionchair Chomhionannais ar fáil le haghaidh comhairlithe ar 7 Eanáir 2010 agus is é spriocdháta i leith freagraí ná 4 Márta 2010. Tá sonraí le fáil ar láithreán Gréasáin na Roinne faoi ‘Current Issues.’

The draft Equality Impact Assessment went out for consultation on 7 January 2010 and the deadline for responses is 4 March 2010. Details are available on the Department's website under ‘Current Issues.’

Special Educational Needs Assessments

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Education what limits are placed on primary schools in referring pupils for special educational needs assessments.

(AQW 4795/10)

Minister of Education: Cuireadh in iúl dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne nach bhfuil aon teorainn curtha ar bhunscoileanna agus iad ag tarchur páistí chun measúnachtaí ar riachtanais speisialta.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that there is no limit placed on primary schools when referring pupils for special needs assessments.

All Boards, with the exception of the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), use a Time Allocation model of service delivery which gives schools access to a fair allocation of educational psychology service time. Using this system each school has its own waiting list of referrals to the Boards' educational psychology services. It is, therefore, the schools which prioritise the pupils whom they deem to be most in need of assessment, usually through discussion with the Boards' educational psychology services. This model allows schools to appraise the needs of pupils on their waiting lists on an ongoing basis.

In all Boards if information is presented to the educational psychologist during consultation that indicates that the pupil has exceptional circumstances such referrals will receive priority.

There is therefore no set limit throughout the north of Ireland to the number of referrals a school can make although the number of pupils who can be assessed by an educational psychologist may be limited within a given area due to the overall capacity of the service.

Capital Budget

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 4385/10, (i) what proportion of her capital budget is spent on (a) new capital projects; and (b) maintenance of existing buildings; and (ii) how she determines the appropriate spending.

(AQW 4801/10)

Minister of Education: Spend on new capital projects varies from year to year and takes into account a range of factors including preparedness of schemes and the level of available funds. It is important that my Department's capital spending is viable and sustainable in the long term and in doing so ensure that our statutory duties in relation to equality and targeting on the basis of objective need are met.

Sa bhliain 2008/09, caitheadh 91% den bhuiséad caipitil ar thionscadail chaipitil (mór-oibreacha agus mionoibreacha araon). Is an buiséad atréimhseach a chumhdaíonn an costas ar chothabháil i scoileanna, ní an buiséad caipitil.

In 2008/09, 91% of the capital budget was spent on capital projects (both major and minor works). The cost of maintenance in schools is met from the recurrent budget and not from the capital budget.

Education Welfare Officer Posts

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of Education Welfare Officer posts; and (ii) the number of these which are vacant within (a) each Education and Library Board area; and (b) each local government district.

(AQW 4868/10)

Minister of Education: Sholáthar na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an t-eolas a iarradh agus atá leagtha amach sna táblaí thíos:

The Education and Library Boards have provided the information requested which is set out in the tables below:

	Number of EWO (Basic Grade) Posts	Number of Vacant EWO (Basic Grade) Posts
BELB	27	0
NEELB	27	1 in Newtownabbey Borough Council 1 in Coleraine Borough Council

	Number of EWO (Basic Grade) Posts	Number of Vacant EWO (Basic Grade) Posts
SEELB	23	0
SELB	28	0
WELB	25	1 in Derry City Council

Youth Services: Expenditure

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the expenditure on youth services for 2008/09; and (ii) the planned expenditure for 2009/10.

(AQW 4872/10)

Minister of Education: Sholáthair an Roinn an maoiniú atá leagtha amach thíos do Sheirbhísí don Ógra sna blianta 2008/09 agus 2009/10:

The funding set out below was provided for Youth Services by the Department of Education in 2008/09 and 2009/10:

£000s

	2008/09	2009/10
DE Recurrent	28,442 ¹	28,637
DE Capital	5,016	7,912

- 1 This excludes £1.597m paid in 2008/09 for part-time youth workers pay arrears relating to the period 2005/06 – 2007/08

In addition to DE funding, OFMDFM and DSD allocated funds to the Youth Service via DE. Details are as follows:

£000s

	2008/09	2009/10
OFMDFM (Summer intervention and specific youth project funding)	476	475
DSD (Neighbourhood Renewal funding)	144	156

English and Maths GCSE Grades

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the percentage of each grade achieved in English and Maths GCSE in each of the last three years for (a) grammar school pupils; (b) secondary school pupils; (c) integrated school pupils; and (d) all pupils; and (ii) the comparable percentages for England and Wales.

(AQW 4892/10)

Minister of Education: Soláthraíonn na táblaí thíos na staitisticí a iarradh:

The tables below provide the statistics requested:

North of Ireland -Grammar	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Q	U	X
English 2008/09	9,196	10.0	29.9	38.4	18.6	2.7	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
Maths 2008/09	8,506	17.2	26.5	33.2	20.2	2.5	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0
English 2007/08	9,254	9.4	30.7	38.8	17.8	3.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
Maths 2007/08	8,679	19.5	24.7	33.3	19.4	2.2	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.3	0.0
English 2006/07	9,282	8.7	31.7	39.3	17.4	2.7	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Maths 2006/07	8,559	15.0	22.2	33.1	25.8	2.6	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.0
North of Ireland - Non-grammar	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Q	U	X
English 2008/09	12,949	0.6	4.4	14.3	32.6	26.1	13.3	4.9	2.1	0.0	1.4	0.2
Maths 2008/09	13,262	1.0	3.4	9.1	29.4	23.2	15.0	10.3	5.7	0.0	2.6	0.3
English 2007/08	13,781	0.7	4.8	14.1	32.8	25.2	12.8	5.4	2.1	0.2	1.6	0.2
Maths 2007/08	14,086	1.0	3.7	10.4	29.3	20.3	15.6	10.5	5.9	0.0	3.1	0.2
English 2006/07	14,054	0.7	4.4	13.9	32.1	26.5	13.2	5.5	2.0	0.0	1.4	0.3
Maths 2006/07	14,099	1.0	3.0	11.5	26.2	21.1	17.3	10.8	4.3	0.0	4.4	0.4

North of Ireland - Integrated	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Q	U	X
English 2008/09	1,806	1.4	6.3	16.4	32.1	24.8	11.5	4.7	1.6	0.0	1.1	0.2
Maths 2008/09	1,805	1.4	3.6	8.7	30.1	22.9	14.5	9.8	5.8	0.0	2.8	0.4
English 2007/08	1,636	1.5	7.0	17.4	32.8	23.8	10.4	4.1	1.8	0.0	1.2	0.0
Maths 2007/08	1,665	1.6	3.4	10.5	28.6	21.6	14.4	9.7	5.5	0.0	2.5	0.4
English 2006/07	1,612	1.1	5.5	15.9	32.9	25.2	11.7	5.0	1.1	0.0	1.3	0.3

North of Ireland - Integrated	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Q	U	X
Maths 2006/07	1,635	1.3	3.3	11.0	29.1	19.3	17.0	9.5	5.1	0.0	4.1	0.4

North of Ireland - All pupils	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Q	U	X
English 2008/09	22,145	4.5	15.0	24.3	26.8	16.4	7.9	2.9	1.2	0.0	0.9	0.1
Maths 2008/09	21,768	7.3	12.4	18.5	25.8	15.1	9.2	6.3	3.5	0.0	1.6	0.2
English 2007/08	23,035	4.2	15.2	24.0	26.8	16.3	7.7	3.2	1.3	0.1	1.0	0.1
Maths 2007/08	22,765	8.1	11.7	19.1	25.5	13.4	9.8	6.5	3.7	0.0	2.0	0.1
English 2006/07	23,336	4.3	14.3	23.0	25.4	15.6	7.5	2.7	1.2	0.0	0.8	0.1
Maths 2006/07	22,658	6.3	10.2	19.7	26.1	14.1	10.9	6.7	2.7	0.0	3.0	0.3

England	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	U	X
English 2008/09	655,800	4.3	11.7	20.0	26.6	19.7	9.9	4.4	1.8	1.3	0.3
Maths 2008/09	693,700	4.8	11.5	17.0	26.1	16.7	10.5	7.0	3.8	1.8	0.8
English 2007/08	642,800	4.2	11.8	20.6	26.2	19.2	10.2	4.5	1.8	1.3	0.3
Maths 2007/08	731,900	5.1	10.9	17.3	26.4	16.4	10.6	7.0	3.6	2.3	0.5
English 2006/07	621,900	4.2	12.2	20.5	26.1	18.4	10.4	4.8	1.9	1.2	0.4
Maths 2006/07	705,900	4.7	10.9	18.2	24.4	15.5	12.0	7.0	3.0	2.6	1.8

Wales	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	No grade	
English 2008/09	34,024	3.5	9.9	18.8	29.4	20.3	10.6	4.7	1.7	1.2	
Maths 2008/09	36,731	4.3	10.4	15.3	26.5	15.7	10.6	8.5	5.2	3.5	
English 2007/08	35,636	3.0	9.8	19.8	31.0	20.5	9.8	3.6	1.4	1.1	

Wales	Entries	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	No grade	
Maths 2007/08	37,953	4.5	11.0	17.4	22.9	15.9	11.9	8.7	4.8	2.8	
English 2006/07	35,852	2.7	9.5	19.8	29.7	20.3	11.0	4.3	1.4	1.2	
Maths 2006/07	37,764	4.9	10.0	19.1	21.2	14.2	12.7	9.7	4.6	3.5	

Sources: DCSF, DE, Welsh Assembly

Notes to table:

1. Due to the effects of rounding, not all grade percentages for a subject when added together may equal 100.
2. Wales and England do not have the Q (result pending) grade.
3. Wales do not differentiate between U (ungraded) and X (did not sit). They combine the two into a 'No Grade' indicator.
4. English figures are rounded to the nearest 100 entries.

Catering Services

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has spent on catering services since May 2007.

(AQW 4896/10)

Minister of Education: Le linn na tréimhse idir 1 Bealtaine 2007 agus 31 Eanáir 2010, chaith an Roinn Oideachais £123,457 ar sheirbhísí lónadóireachta.

During the period from 1st May 2007 to 31st January 2010, the Department of Education has spent £123,457 on catering services.

Nursery School Places

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children are due to start nursery school in East Belfast in September 2010; and (ii) how many nursery school places are available.

(AQW 4898/10)

Minister of Education: (i) The enrolment process for the 2010/11 school year is still ongoing and as a result the relevant Education and Library Boards have advised that it is not possible, at this stage, to give a definitive figure for the number of children due to start nursery or pre-school education in September 2010.

However, using the number of children currently in P1 as a proxy for the size of the pre-school cohort in 2010/11, it is anticipated that there will be approximately 896 children in their final pre-school year in the East Belfast constituency in September 2010.

(ii) Funded pre-school places are available in statutory nursery schools and nursery units attached to statutory primary schools and in voluntary and private settings. According to the October 2009 school census there are 979 pre-school places available in the current school year in the East Belfast constituency. This includes 820 places in statutory nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools. In addition, there are 159 places available in voluntary and private settings. However, this number can fluctuate if there is demand for additional places.

Mar a léiríodh thuas, tá an próiseas rollaithe don scoilbhliain 2010/11 leantach agus coinneoidh na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ábhartha an seasamh seo faoi bhreathnú lena chinntiú go

mbaintear sprioc beartais na Roinne amach chun áit mhaoinithe réamhscoile a sholáthar do gach páiste ar mhian lena thuismitheoirí ceann a bheith acu.

As indicated above, the enrolment process for the 2010/11 school year is still ongoing and the relevant Education and Library Boards will keep the position under review to ensure that the Department's policy objective to provide a funded pre-school place for every child whose parents wish them to have one is met.

Corran Integrated Primary School, Larne

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister of Education for an update on the provision of a new build for Corran Integrated Primary School, Larne.

(AQW 4899/10)

Minister of Education: Is fíor-thábhachtach go bhfuil infheistiú san earnáil oideachais i gcomhréir agus tacúil leis an chreat beartais atá mé á chur i bhfeidhm lena chinntiú go mbaineann muid ár ndualgais reachtúla um chomhionannais amach agus go bhfuil muid ag díriú ar riachtanas sainaithnithe. I mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2009, choimisiúnaigh mé athbhreithniú ar thionscadail reatha, lena n-áirítear an t-athbhreithniú sin ar Corran Integrated Primary School, lena dhearbhu go bhfuil siad i gcomhréir leis an chreat beartais agus go mbeidh siad, mar sin, inmharthana agus inchothaithe san fhadtéarma.

It is critically important that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place to ensure we meet our statutory duties on equality and targeting on the basis of identified need. In October 2009, I commissioned a review of current projects, including that for Corran Integrated Primary School, to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and hence will be viable and sustainable in the long term.

The outcome of the review will inform the development of a more strategic approach to capital investment decisions and management of the schools estate and projects will then be prioritised for progression in the coming financial years. It is therefore not possible to provide an update on the proposed major capital works project for Corran Integrated Primary School at this time.

Payment of Services and Supplies

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Education if her Department is meeting the target of ten days for the payment of services and supplies.

(AQW 4910/10)

Minister of Education: Tugaim tacaíocht láidir don sprioc chun íocaíochtaí a dhéanamh le linn 10 lá oibre, go háirithe le linn an choir reatha seo chun donais eacnamaíoch. Déanann an Roinn monatóireacht ar a feidhmiú ar bhonn míosúil agus glacann sí cibé beart ceartúcháin iomchuí lena chinntiú go bpróiseálfar íocaíochtaí chomh héafachtach agus is féidir.

I strongly support the target of making payments within 10 working days, particularly during the current economic downturn. The Department monitors its performance on a monthly basis and takes whatever corrective action is appropriate to ensure that payments are processed as efficiently as possible.

During the course of 2009, the Department's average prompt payment performance improved and in the second half of the year DE achieved an average prompt payment performance of just below 70%.

Ongoing resourcing difficulties in Account NI continue to impact adversely on DE prompt payment performance.

Educational Underachievement

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 623/10, why she was able to provide figures for educational underachievement in Protestant and Roman Catholic children at GCSE level, but stated in response to AQW 4541/10 that community background figures were not available.

(AQW 4928/10)

Minister of Education: Fuarthas na figiúirí a soláthraíodh in AQO 623/10 ó shuirbhé fágálach scoile, bunachar sonraí a mhionshonraíonn cúlra pobail daltaí aonair. Ní chuimsíonn an bunachar sonraí seo sonraí ar ábhair aonair do gach iontráil GCSE agus Ardleibhéil, mar a iarradh in AQW 4541/10. Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil ach ó thacar sonraí réiteach sonraí RM. Is bunachar sonraí é seo a cheannaítear go bliantúil ó University of Bath a sholáthraíonn eolas ar ábhair GCSE. Ní chuimsíonn an bunachar sonraí seo cúlra pobail daltaí aonair. Ní féidir an tacar sonraí seo a cheangal le bunachar sonraí daonáirimh a choinnítear laistigh den Roinn chun cúlra pobail a shannadh do gach dalta. Sannadh cineál bainistíochta scoile do gach iontráil, mar sin, bunaithe ar an scoil ina raibh an dalta rollaithe.

The figures provided in AQO 623/10 were sourced from the school leavers survey, a database that includes the community background of individual pupils. This database does not contain individual subject data for all GCSE and A level entries, as requested in AQW 4541/10. This information is only available from the RM data solutions dataset. This is a database purchased annually from the University of Bath that provides GCSE subject information. This database does not contain the community background of individual candidates. It is not possible to fully link this dataset with the census databases held within the Department in order to assign each pupil a community background. Each entry was therefore assigned a school management type based on the school the pupil was enrolled in.

Peripatetic Language Tutors

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many peripatetic language tutors in the Primary Languages programme are qualified primary school teachers, broken down by the language they teach. **(AQW 4931/10)**

Minister of Education: Tá Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt (BOLO) freagrach as an Chlár Bunscoile um Theangacha a riar. Chuir Príomhfheidhmeannach an BOLO in iúl dom go bhfuil 74 de na múinteoirí taistil ina múinteoirí cáilithe. Seo a leanas an miondealú air seo de réir na 3 teanga:

The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) is the lead board in administering the Primary Languages Programme. I have been advised by the Chief Executive of SEELB that currently 74 of the peripatetic tutors are qualified teachers. The breakdown across the 3 languages is as follows:

Spanish	38
Irish	14
Polish	22

Equality Impact Assessments

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Education what measures are included within Equality Impact Assessments conducted by her Department to ensure that the interests of people with identities outside the two perceived main traditions in Northern Ireland are taken into account. **(AQW 4971/10)**

Minister of Education: Tá treoir na Roinne ar Mheasúnacht Tionchair Chomhionannais (MTC) a dhéanamh ar fáil do gach foireann ar shuíomh inlín na Roinne. Le linn phróiseas na MTC, ba chóir go mbreithneofaí gach foinse eolais, foinsí inmheánacha agus foinsí seachtracha araon, chun tionchar ar gach grúpa tágarta 75 a mheas, leana n-áirítear na grúpálacha reiligiúin atá lasmuigh den dá phríomhthraidisiún. Chomh maith leis sin, tá 450 grúpa agus duine aonair ag an Roinn a léiríonn réimse éagsúil iomlán de ghrúpaí tágarta 75 a dtéitear i gcomhairle leo le linn phróiseas na MTC.

The Department's guidance on undertaking an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) is available to all staff through the department's Intranet Site. During an EQIA process all sources of information both internal and external should be considered to gauge the impact on all section 75 groups including those religious groupings outside the main two traditions. In addition the department has 450 groups and individuals which reflect the full and diverse range of section 75 groups which are consulted during the EQIA process.

Attractiveness of Headship

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on the joint North/South research study on the 'Attractiveness of Headship'.

(AQO 796/10)

Minister of Education: Sholáthair an Dochtúir Tom Hesketh, Stiúrthóir ar an Aonad Traenála Réigiúnach, cóip den tuairisc dheireanach dom. Beidh mé ag déanamh plé ar an mbealach chun tosaigh don tuairisc le Batt O'Keefe, T.D., an tAire Oideachais agus Eolaíochta sa Deisceart.

Dr Tom Hesketh, Director of the Regional Training Unit, has provided me with a copy of the final report. I will be discussing the way forward on the report with Batt O'Keefe, T.D., Minister for Education and Science in the South.

School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) and partner countries. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the environment and climate within which they work. The importance of school leadership and the role that it plays in all our children's futures cannot be underestimated. Leadership is not just the ability to manage efficiently - it is key to improved educational outcomes.

I want to close the attainment gap between those schools that serve some of our children well - in some cases very well indeed - and leave others to the vagaries of an outmoded model based on selection of some children at 11 and to tolerance of educational failure.

Strong and dedicated leadership is essential as we move to address the issues of social equity and educational underachievement in our schools. Supporting effective governance and leadership is an important pillar in our school improvement policy, particularly in this time of change. I look to school leaders to lead on the issue of social equality which is at the heart of the transfer debate.

The study found that many of the issues identified in the OECD report on School Leadership apply across Ireland, both north and south. In line with international experience, both parts of Ireland face challenges relating to the demographic profile of principals and the perceived attractiveness of the position. The research has identified a range of issues relating to:

- the age profile of principals;
- female representation in school leadership positions;
- the perception of the role of principals;
- concerns in relation to workload, administrative tasks and bureaucracy, and financial management;
- training or preparation for the role.

The study advises that there are some issues that are more specific to the north and south of Ireland particularly in regard to the structural and cultural nature of the educational landscape and to specific terms and conditions for principals. These issues relate to:

- the relatively high number of small schools which impacts on recruitment and retention and the perception that the educational landscape is relatively conservative;
- principals' terms and conditions also seem to discourage applicants;

However, the study also found that:

- newly appointed principals are largely happy in their role, with a high proportion stating that they are very satisfied;
- findings from both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research emphasise the intrinsic rewards that principalship can bring and the vocational nature of the role; the chance to 'make a difference'.

Stakeholders and focus group participants in this research also warmly welcomed the investment in each jurisdiction in school leadership.

Indeed, last week I was privileged to attend the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH) graduation ceremony held at the Ramada Hotel in Belfast to celebrate the achievements of a further two hundred and twelve candidates. The PQH is a qualification to prepare teachers for principalship and is delivered by the Regional Training Unit through funding provided by my Department.

Budget Pressures

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to outline the proposals she has received from the Education Committee in relation to the £90m pressures faced by her Department in the coming year. (AQO 797/10)

Minister of Education: Scríobh mé chuig an gCoiste Oideachais ar an gceathrú lá déag de mhí Eanáir ag iarraidh a dtuairimí a fháil maidir leis an gcaoi arbh fhéidir na coigilteas a chomhaontaigh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin agus na brúnna eile atá roimh Sheirbhísí Oideachais an bhliain seo chugainn a bhaint amach i gcomhthéacs foriomlán mo thosaíochtaí don oideachas.

I wrote to the Education Committee on 14 January seeking their views on how the savings agreed by the Executive and also the other pressures facing Education Services next year could be delivered within the overall context of my priorities for education. To assist the Committee in their deliberations I was invited to and agreed to attend their meeting of 3 February to discuss the budgeting position for 2010/11 in more detail. Following this the Chairperson of the Committee sent me a submission on 11 February setting out the Committee's response. I am currently considering their reply. However on first glance it would seem that the only substantive proposal submitted by the Committee was that a substantial element of the £24.3 million budget currently available for the Review of Special Educational Needs in 2010/11 could be used to address pressures next year. This reply is somewhat disappointing as I had hoped for a more comprehensive response.

Special Educational Needs: Statementing

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the interboard policy on statementing. (AQO 799/10)

Minister of Education: Each Education and Library Board 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 in 1998. While each Board is working within the common Special Educational Need Framework, detailed within the Code of Practice, it is widely recognised, however, that a number of differing practices in relation to assessment, statementing and provision have become inculcated in the practices across the 5 Boards.

Léirítear é seo trí réimse eolais, mar shampla, ar líon na bpáistí a fuair ráitis ar oideachas 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.

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.

In order to establish the Education and Skills Authority a range of convergence issues are currently being addressed including commonality in the issuing of statements. Once the Education and Skills Authority is established a uniform and common approach to statementing will be practised.

In the meantime the Regional Strategy Group for Special Education established a sub-group to agree regional criteria for initiating statutory assessments of special educational needs and making statements of special educational needs. The Provisional Regional Criteria have now been introduced

in all five Boards with effect from September 2009 and my department has recently provided funding of £10,000 to meet the costs of publishing the associated documents. These documents detail the common criteria to be applied by Boards when considering requests for statutory assessment and making statements for children with special educational needs.

A five Board Working Group is currently 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.

The Department of Education has recently concluded a period of formal consultation on a Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion. Key considerations, as work on the Review moves forward, will be to develop detailed proposals for a revised framework that will provide a reduction in bureaucracy and greater commonality of assessment and provision made by Education and Library Boards for children and young people facing barriers to learning. One proposal under consideration will be that to move from statutory Statements of Special Educational Needs, to statutory Coordinated Support Plans, which would have an additional focus on anticipated outcomes, an element not adequately captured in the current process.

Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education how she intends to proceed with the consultation document 'Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'.
(AQO 800/10)

Minister of Education: Eisíodh an doiciméad comhairliúcháin 'Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith – An Bealach Chun Tosaigh do Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais agus Chuimsiú' le haghaidh comhairliúcháin ar 10ú Lúnasa 2009 agus ba é an dáta deiridh ag an tús ná 31ú Deireadh Fómhair 2009. De bharr go raibh moill bliana ann agus an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin ag déanamh breithnithe ar an dréacht-doiciméad comhairliúcháin agus, nuair a d'fhaomh siad é i mí Iúil 2009, shocraigh mé an doiciméad a eisiúint le haghaidh comhairliúcháin chomh luath agus ab fhéidir ina dhiaidh sin le tuilleadh moille a sheachaint agus le ligean don phobal, do scoileanna agus do pháirtithe eile leasmhara na moltaí ardleibhéil a bhreathnú.

The consultation document 'Every School a Good School – The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' was issued for consultation on 10th August 2009 with an initial closing date for responses of 31st October 2009. As there had been a delay of over a year whilst 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 so as to avoid further delay and to enable the public, schools and other stakeholders to begin to consider the high level proposals.

After a number of requests from parents, schools, MLA's and others, I agreed to initially extend the closing date to 30th November 2009 and then to 31st January 2010.

It is imperative that provision for children with special educational needs builds upon the good practice already evidenced in many schools and is substantially improved 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 special educational needs of pupils through earlier identification of need, the effective use of school based interventions and through the advice and support available to them from a range of professionals.

Following the end of the formal consultation period I have two key priorities. One is for a thorough analysis of the many consultation responses received. A summary of the responses will be produced by the Department of Education and will be made available for access by all stakeholders later this year.

I will then consider the proposals in light of the responses made. This will involve the development of detailed policy options, including the financial, legislative and operational considerations of their implementation, to be set out so that I can consider how the Review can be taken forward.

Should any legislative change be required, this will be progressed through the Assembly in the normal way and any necessary stakeholder consultation will be undertaken at that time. Should a revised code of practice on special educational needs be required the Department of Education will undertake appropriate stakeholder consultation on a draft code prior to implementation.

My other priority relates to the need to increase the capacity of school personnel, to enable mainstream schools to meet the educational needs of most SEN pupils, already placed in those schools, from within their own resources and without unnecessary recourse to support from external agencies. It is clear that children with special educational needs require access to teachers with appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding, whether this falls within the existing or any future revised framework. The Review therefore proposes the development and delivery of a comprehensive capacity building programme for all mainstream schools that would be tailored to the specific needs of principals, teachers, special educational needs coordinators, classroom assistants and boards of governors. The Department of Education has already begun work on this programme, including the development of SENCO guidance and indicators of good practice, which I intend will be rolled out in the 2010/11 academic year.

Educational Underachievement: East Belfast

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Education what action her Department is taking to address the high levels of educational underachievement in inner East Belfast.

(AQO 801/10)

Minister of Education: Is féidir tearcghnóthachtáil oideachais a shainmhíniú mar na páistí sin a fhágann an scoil gan chúig GCSE maith ar a laghad ag gráid A* go C lena n-áirítear sa litearthacht agus sa mhataimic. D'fhág 11,000 páiste an scoil anuraidh gan an leibhéal seo a bhaint amach.

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 literacy and maths. Last year around 11,000 children left school without having achieved at this level. In inner East Belfast, the figure was 175 or 78.5% of young people from the area. Too often, underachievement is related to socio-economic disadvantage and is compounded by poverty of aspiration.

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 put an end to these detrimental impacts, particularly on our most disadvantaged young people.

My focus is on tackling underachievement wherever it exists and improving outcomes for all our young people. In addition to Transfer 2010, am putting in place a jigsaw of interconnected policies aimed at ensuring every child fulfils her or his potential – 'Every School a Good School', the revised curriculum, the literacy and numeracy strategy, the review of special educational needs and inclusion, the establishment of the ESA and the Achieving Derry and Achieving Belfast programmes, which includes 2 schools situated in Inner East Belfast.

There has been a significant level of recent capital investment in schools in East Belfast. New school buildings have been completed for Ashfield Girls High School, Orangefield Primary School, Glendhu Nursery School and Ravenscroft Nursery School and construction is underway for new schools for Grosvenor Grammar School and Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock. In addition, a further six major capital projects are at various stages of the planning process.

Equality Impact Assessments

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Education if she sought the views of the Equality Commission in relation to any recent Equality Impact Assessments carried out by her Department.

(AQO 802/10)

Minister of Education: Tá an Coimisiún um Chomhionannas áirithe ar an liosta de chomhairlithe le haghaidh gach comhairliúchán ar Mheasúnachtaí Tionchair Chomhionannais.

The Equality Commission would be included in the list of consultees for all consultations on equality screenings and Equality Impact Assessments.

Education Bill

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to outline the timeframe for a resolution of the issues surrounding the Education and Skills Authority Bill and its Consideration Stage in the Assembly.

(AQO 803/10)

Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn aird an Chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQO 624/10 a chuir Fred Cobain agus a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 29 Eanáir 2010.

I refer the Member to my answer to AQO/624/10 tabled by Fred Cobain and published in the Official Report on 29 January 2010.

Early Years Strategy

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education what funding her Department has allocated for the 0-6 Years strategy in the coming year.

(AQO 804/10)

Minister of Education: Tá breithniú á dhéanamh go fóill ar bhuiséid mo Roinne don bhliain atá le teacht.

My department's budgets for the coming year are still under consideration.

Department for Employment and Learning

Strategy to Support People Not in Education, Employment or Training

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will consider developing a strategy to support people not in education, employment or training to develop skills and find paid employment.

(AQW 4583/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The issue of those who are not in education, employment or training is pertinent to the activities of a wide range of Northern Ireland departments. My Department is currently carrying out a scoping study to learn more about this group and it should be completed very soon. 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.

Young people not in education, employment or training often have barriers to participation with many having low levels of numeracy and literacy. My Department has in place a wide range of programmes and initiatives to help people to enter and remain in education, employment or training.

For example, the Careers service provides impartial information, advice and guidance to young people throughout Northern Ireland. Careers Advisers work to ensure that each young person is encouraged and supported to enable them to achieve their potential within education, training and employment.

Training for Success targets 16-24 year olds allowing them to enter training at an appropriate level and progress to a stage where they can maximise their potential through the development of personal and employability skills and the achievement of qualifications and employment.

Widening participation initiatives in both Further Education and Higher Education provide opportunities for young people who may not otherwise access this level of education.

The joint work between my Department and the Department of Education, on 14-19 year olds, aims to ensure that each young person will be able to achieve their potential by following the programme of learning that is most appropriate to their needs and aspirations.

Economically Inactive People

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures her Department has in place to address the number of economically inactive people.

(AQW 4590/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: A comprehensive range of services is available through my Department's Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres and through contracted Providers to help all unemployed people, including those regarded as "economically inactive" find work.

Steps to Work (StW) is the Department's main adult return to work programme. The programme is available to anyone who is aged 18 years old or over and who is unemployed or economically inactive, irrespective of whether or not they are in receipt of benefit. There is no upper age limit for participating in the programme.

The Department has a range of provision within the Pathways to Work initiative called the choices menu. The Choices menu is targeted at people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit/Employment & Support Allowance. The choices menu consists of; the Condition Management Programme, the Work Preparation Programme, Return to Work Credit and New Deal for Disabled People.

The Department also provides a range of provision to assist disabled people who are economically inactive find and keep suitable employment, this provision includes: the Job Introduction Scheme, Access to Work (NI) and Workable (NI).

The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) is available in Belfast, Londonderry and Strabane and complements, but is independent of, the statutory employment services. The service is available to, amongst others, those who are returning to the labour market and those who are not claiming benefits.

Employment Levels Amongst School Leavers

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures her Department has in place to address the employment levels amongst school leavers.

(AQW 4591/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department offers a range of services, through the Careers Service and the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, to assist school leavers into employment.

Careers Advisers currently provide an impartial, all-age Careers Information, Advice and Guidance service. In partnership with schools we provide guidance services to young people to support them to develop effective career decision making skills leading to increased and appropriate participation in education, training and employment. Careers Advisers continue to work with school leavers, including those entering the labour market for the first time, to support their effective career planning.

Provision of effective Careers Information, Advice and Guidance for clients vulnerable to social exclusion is a key action within "Preparing for Success", the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy. In support of this, Careers Advisers endeavour to make contact with 16 and 17 year olds who are not in education, training or employment, to provide support with career decision making, with the ultimate aim of re-engagement.

The ApprenticeshipsNI programme offers a range of apprenticeship opportunities for existing/newly recruited employees, of all ages. Specialist Support Services are available for apprentices with an auditory, visual or other physical disability. There are over 100 Apprenticeships to choose from, and they can take between 2 to 4 years to complete depending on the level of study. They are designed by Sector Skills Councils and Industry Representative Bodies to meet the needs of each particular sector. The Department undertakes to pay the full costs of the 'off-the-job' training for the duration of the

apprenticeship. ApprenticeshipsNI are delivered jointly by Employers and Training Suppliers to ensure that apprentices:

- get first rate training
- build knowledge and skills
- gain qualifications
- earn a wage from day one

South Eastern Regional College, Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the timescale for the capital project for the South Eastern Regional College, Bangor.

(AQW 4639/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The procurement of the Bangor project reached Pre-Qualification stage at December 2009 and five contractors have been shortlisted to go to full tender. Full tender stage has been put on hold due to a reduction in the Department for Employment and Learning's 2010/11 capital budget. This follows the recent Review of the 2010/11 Spending Plans, and a likely decrease in the proceeds from an asset disposal which was included in the Department's 2010/11 budget. Whilst a bid will be made for resources in the next financial year the Executive's budgetary position is such that there can be no certainty as to when the project will be resumed.

Capital Projects

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) what capital projects scheduled for 2010/11 have been delayed by his Department; and (ii) the reasons for the delay in each case.

(AQW 4640/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Performing Arts Centre and Technology Innovation Centre in Bangor, a South Eastern Regional College project, has been delayed. The project was due to go to tender in December 2009 but has been postponed due to a shortfall in available capital resources in 2010/11. The shortfall in the 2010/11 FE Capital Budget arises following the recent Review of Spending Plans 2010/11 and the likelihood of a reduced receipt from the disposal of the Department's Felden property.

Hughes Christensen

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) what action his Department has taken following the announcement of the 210 redundancies at Hughes Christensen; and (ii) what support his Department has offered to redundant employees.

(AQW 4649/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) When companies face redundancies, my officials work in partnership with organisations such as the local Further Education College, Lead Training Providers, Education and Guidance Service, and the Social Security Agency to offer a wide range of services to those affected by the redundancy. These services include advice on employment, education, training, reskilling, job search and benefit advice.

In previous redundancy situations within this company, my Department organised redundancy clinics to offer support and advice to those employees affected. My officials are currently in discussions with Hughes Christensen, to arrange a suitable date for a similar Redundancy Clinic.

The Further Education (FE) Sector's Rapid Response NI, which is being funded by my Department, also offers a range of support to employers and employees affected by redundancy situations. To date, 46 Hughes Christensen employees have been engaged through the programme and a range of support programmes have been scheduled for delivery.

- (ii) In addition to the tailored advice and support available at the Redundancy Clinic, my Department has produced and updated a range of guidance materials, to provide information for workers on their employment rights, including in the case of redundancy. One guidance booklet (available at the link below or from all Jobs and Benefits Offices), provides full details of employees' entitlements under the statutory redundancy payments scheme:

http://www.delni.gov.uk/er3_redundancy_entitlement_statutory_rights_1st_october_2009.pdf

A second Departmental booklet (again available at the link below or from all Jobs and Benefits Offices) contains full details of the rights and protections of employees and their representatives, to enable them to participate fully in the process of redundancy consultation, as well as information on redress, where the rights of employee representatives may have been infringed:

http://www.delni.gov.uk/er4_redundancy_consultation_and_notification_october_2009.pdf

Transport to Further Education Colleges

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he can confirm that the allocation of funding for transport to further education colleges will not be reduced in the coming year.

(AQW 4778/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: A 'Home to College Transport' budget of £5,245,000 was made available to assist students attending Further Education Colleges in 2009/10. As Departmental budgets have yet to be agreed for the 2010/11 financial year, I am unable to confirm the level of support at this time.

Further and Higher Education

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQO 108/10, in relation to further and higher education (i) how many new policies he has introduced since coming into office; and (ii) how many pieces of legislation his Department has brought before the Assembly.

(AQW 4818/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) Since coming into office in May 2007, my Department has introduced the following new Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) policies:

Further Education

- ICT as a Third Essential Skill;
- Employer Support pilot programme;
- Learner Access and Engagement (LAE) pilot programme;
- FE Means Business-Consultation on Curriculum in FE Colleges
- the implementation of the vocational qualifications reform programme; and
- the establishment of an independent regulator for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

Higher Education

- Prior Year Tax;
- Equivalent or Lower Level Qualification (ELQ) policy;
- introduction of the Higher and Further Education Collaboration Fund;
- a strategic planning approval process for Higher Education in Further Education;
- new funding model for St Mary's and Stranmillis University Colleges; and
- the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) replaced the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) as the quality assurance body for Higher Education in Further Education courses in Northern Ireland;

- (ii) Further Education Division and Higher Education have introduced the following pieces of legislation:

Further Education

- The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) Regulations (Northern Ireland) were brought before the Assembly in 2007 by Further Education Division and have been renewed thereafter annually; and
- two Legislative Consent Motions relating to the Education and Skills Act 2008 and the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 have been resolved by the Assembly. Both motions related to the reform of the regulatory system for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

Higher Education

Higher Education Division has brought 18 pieces of legislation before the Assembly, all of which concern higher education Student Finance. Various pieces of student finance legislation are made, or are amended, on an annual basis. These include:

- the Education (Student Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland)
- the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland); and
- the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations (Northern Ireland).

Catering Services

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much his Department has spent on catering services since May 2007.

(AQW 4897/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Expenditure incurred by this Department on catering services since May 2007 has been as follows.

For Financial year ended 31 March 2008	£31,361
For Financial year ended 31 March 2009	£29,283

Local Employment Intermediary Service Contract

Mr P Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to ensure funding for the Local Employment Intermediary Service contract, as part of on-going initiatives by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force.

(AQW 4909/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) is a Departmental initiative and is available in Belfast, Londonderry and Strabane. It is not part of on-going initiatives by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforces. I have recently agreed that Provider contracts for the LEMIS service in all areas may be extended by one year to 31 March 2011. This means that the service will continue to be available to those who need it. The Department will invest around £1.8 million in the scheme in 2010/11.

LEMIS complements, but is independent of, the statutory employment services. The service is available to, amongst others, those who are returning to the labour market and those who are not claiming benefits.

University of Ulster: Sports Complex

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposed development of a sporting complex at the University of Ulster, Coleraine.
(AQO 809/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The University has submitted an economic appraisal for the construction of a new Sports Centre on its Coleraine campus and applied a total of £6.9m of funding under the Strategic Capital Investment Fund. However, it is proposed in the Executive's revised spending plans for 2010/11 that the funding available under the Strategic Capital Investment Fund be reduced by £8.1m and the consequences of this is that the funding for the Sports Centre will be reduced to some £2.5m. If this is confirmed, the University will have to decide whether to proceed with the project at the reduced level of funding.

Stranmillis University College and Queen's University Belfast Merger

Rt Hon J Donaldson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposed merger of Stranmillis College and Queen's University.
(AQO 810/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I will answer Oral number 6, 13 and 15 together. The College submitted an economic appraisal in support of the Governing Body's decision to merge with Queen's University. The appraisal has recently been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel. I will now wish to share the appraisal with the Committee for Employment and Learning, and, subject to Executive agreement, proceed to a public consultation on the proposal. The outcome of the consultation will inform my decision whether or not to proceed with legislation to effect the proposed merger. The legislation will be debated on the floor of the Assembly.

If we are to proceed with the merger, a key issue for me will be to ensure that the ethos of the controlled sector is integral to the proposed Stranmillis School of Education. I believe this will enhance educational outcomes and contribute to the shared future we all aspire to.

South Eastern Regional College, Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for a progress report on the proposed new capital build at the Bangor campus of the South Eastern Regional College.
(AQO 811/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The proposed Performing Arts Centre and Technology Innovation Centre Capital development project in Bangor has completed the Pre-Qualification Questionnaire stage of procurement which identified a short list of five contractors. The next step would generally be to go out to tender to the five construction companies, however, due to a shortfall in the FE Capital Budget for 2010/11 the tendering stage has been suspended. A bid for additional resources will be made in the June monitoring round.

Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training

Mrs C McGill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if the scoping study has been completed on young people not in education, employment or training.
(AQO 812/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The scoping study on those who are not in education, employment or training is nearing completion. The report is currently at final drafting stages within my Department. Throughout the information-gathering process officials have engaged with a wide range of relevant organisations and in particular attended the recent DEL Committee seminar on the subject. It is also intended that officials will brief the Committee on the outcomes of the scoping study in the next few weeks.

While the Department for Employment and Learning has taken the lead in the scoping study, it is clear that the issues affecting these young people are cross-departmental and multi-agency in nature. For example, it is telling and very pertinent that in the year 2007/2008, 80% of our young people who left school at 16 did not achieve at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C (including equivalents) including English and Maths. This represents a very significant level of under achievement which impacts adversely on the life chances of our young people and this would need to be addressed in any future strategy.

Graduate Employment

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department has taken since 2007 to co-ordinate the progression of graduates into suitable employment.

(AQO 815/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: In addition to the Department's main adult return to work provision Steps to Work, my Department currently offers a range of provision specifically tailored for graduates. This includes Graduate Internships which are being piloted in Belfast and Londonderry; the INTRO Graduate Management Development Programme and Graduate Acceleration Programme (GAP) which combines work placement with graduate level training.

Graduates of Queens University and University of Ulster can continue to avail of the universities' careers guidance services for up to 2 and 3 years respectively following graduation. In addition graduates can avail of the all-age careers guidance services provided by the Department's Careers Service.

During the economic downturn my Department has funded additional 200 places on the INTRO programme. The Internship pilot will offer up to 70 graduate opportunities, 50 in Belfast and 20 in Londonderry, and it is intended to have these filled by 1 March 2010. GAP commenced recruiting on 11 January 2010 and it is planned to provide up to 150 graduate placements.

Universities: STEM Subjects

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to promote the study of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects at undergraduate and postgraduate level within universities and colleges.

(AQO 816/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is on track to achieve its Programme for Government target to increase by 300 the number of PhD research students at local universities in economically relevant subjects, including STEM, by 2010. The Department has also provided funding for the Step Up To Science programme in the University of Ulster and commissioned a feasibility study into the merits of providing a STEM scholarship or bursary in Northern Ireland's Higher and Further Education institutions.

Stranmillis University College and Queen's University Belfast Merger

Dr A McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the status of the business case for the proposed merger of Stranmillis College and Queen's University.

(AQO 817/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I will answer Oral number 6, 13 and 15 together. The College submitted an economic appraisal in support of the Governing Body's decision to merge with Queen's University. The appraisal has recently been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel. I will now wish to share the appraisal with the Committee for Employment and Learning, and, subject to Executive agreement, proceed to a public consultation on the proposal. The outcome of the consultation will inform my decision whether or not to proceed with legislation to effect the proposed merger. The legislation will be debated on the floor of the Assembly.

If we are to proceed with the merger, a key issue for me will be to ensure that the ethos of the controlled sector is integral to the proposed Stranmillis School of Education. I believe this will enhance educational outcomes and contribute to the shared future we all aspire to.

Programme-led Apprenticeships Scheme

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the Programme-Led Apprenticeship Scheme, and to outline the level of consultation with employers and colleges prior to the commencement of the scheme.

(AQO 818/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Programme Led Apprenticeships were introduced in September 2009 as a contingency measure in view of the lack of apprentice jobs available for school leavers in the recession. The scheme has been very successful, in that almost 3,000 young people, who would not otherwise have had the opportunity, are participating on the programme, and are following normal apprenticeship frameworks. The difficulty being faced by training providers in securing employer placements for the NVQ element of the frameworks is a disappointment. However, my Department has been exploring this issue with providers and employers representatives, in order to identify how effective employer placements can be identified.

In an effort to design a scheme that would meet future industry needs, and provide continuity to successful apprenticeship training during the economic downturn, the Department engaged with colleagues at a senior level from Further Education Colleges and the Education and Training Inspectorate. However the critical need for timely intervention prevented further extensive consultation taking place.

As the process for re-contracting for the delivery of Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI provision is now underway my Department has already commenced initial consultation.

The design and future shape of provision for unemployed 16-17 year olds will involve discussion with stakeholders such as Sector Skills Councils and other Business Representatives, Training Organisations, Awarding Bodies and the Education and Training Inspectorate. In addition, my officials have already initiated a process of consulting with young people to ascertain their views and suggestions for an improved provision at all levels.

Stranmillis University College and Queen's University Belfast Merger

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the position on the business plan for the proposed merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College.

(AQO 819/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I will answer Oral number 6, 13 and 15 together. The College submitted an economic appraisal in support of the Governing Body's decision to merge with Queen's University. The appraisal has recently been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel. I will now wish to share the appraisal with the Committee for Employment and Learning, and, subject to Executive agreement, proceed to a public consultation on the proposal. The outcome of the consultation will inform my decision whether or not to proceed with legislation to effect the proposed merger. The legislation will be debated on the floor of the Assembly.

If we are to proceed with the merger, a key issue for me will be to ensure that the ethos of the controlled sector is integral to the proposed Stranmillis School of Education. I believe this will enhance educational outcomes and contribute to the shared future we all aspire to.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Authentic Historical Re-enactment Events

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he has taken to develop authentic historical re-enactment events, building on the success of Scarva's Sham Fight and those events which take place in New England, which promote cultural heritage as a tourism opportunity. (AQO 771/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) recognises that authentic historical re-enactments can enhance the enjoyment of an event for visitors, providing they are professionally organised and managed. Tourism Ireland continues to engage with the NITB in relation to the Culture & Heritage product portfolio.

There are a variety of specialist organisations which promote all aspects of Northern Ireland's historic and living culture including the Ulster Scots Agency, the Ulster Historical Foundation and the Orange Order all of which are reflected strongly in Tourism Ireland's overseas promotional materials, activities and marketing campaigns. Tourism Ireland welcomes new, market-ready products which reflect authentic and attractive dimensions of Northern Ireland's history and culture.

In addition, NITB is liaising with the Wartime Living History Association (WLHA) on the potential of historical re-enactment events as part of the wider events offering. I am not aware of the activities in New England to which the Member refers, but would be happy to pass on his suggestions to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board if he provides me with further details.

Wind Turbine Units

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she can confirm that there will be ten posts created within new wind turbine units; and if the posts will be location specific. (AQW 4620/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am aware that the Member attended a recent consultation seminar on my Department's draft Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan and has, since then, raised a number of related Assembly Questions.

This issue was not raised at the seminar and there are no such staffing plans.

Baker Hughes: Financial Support

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how much financial support her Department has provided to Baker Hughes for its operations in Northern Ireland; and (ii) under what terms any of this money can be recouped, in light of the recent redundancies announced by Hughes Christensen in East Belfast. (AQW 4679/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) Invest NI and its legacy agencies, over the last twenty years, have offered £6.1m of financial assistance to Hughes Christensen, with £5.4m having been claimed against agreed targets.
- (ii) All grant assistance, provided by Invest NI, is subject to a legal offer document that contains terms and conditions associated with the grant. This includes definitions of what constitutes a breach of the agreement and how grant monies can be recovered in such circumstances. In instances of breach of the terms of any agreement, Invest NI will consider a range of factors in seeking to secure a grant repayment broadly commensurate with the proportion of the economic benefit foregone. Agreements are also time bound and, provided that the company delivers the project investment and associated activity over a stipulated period of time, the amount of liability may decrease.

This approach has resulted in over £28 million of grant monies being recovered from companies over the past five years.

Whilst Baker Hughes currently has live agreements with Invest NI, the company is still engaged in a 90 day consultation period with its employees, it would therefore be inappropriate at this stage to release any details of potential clawback terms or figures.

Offshore Renewable Energy

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she can confirm that the offshore renewable energy quota for 2020 will not take priority over resolving on-going problems with the fishing industry.

(AQW 4730/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The draft Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan 2009-2020, which is currently the subject of a public consultation, proposes targets of at least 600 MW of offshore wind and 300MW of tidal resources in Northern Ireland waters by 2020. The draft Plan fully recognises the need to work with and consult all other sectors operating within the marine environment, including the fishing sector. A further proposal within the Plan is the establishment of an Offshore Renewable Energy Forum to engage with relevant external stakeholders in the marine environment to ensure their interests are fully considered in the implementation of the Plan.

Offshore Renewable Energy: Carlingford Lough

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she has had any discussions with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in relation to offshore renewable energy in Carlingford lough.

(AQW 4732/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The specific issue of offshore renewables in Carlingford Lough has not been on the agenda for any of the bilateral meetings I have had with Minister Ryan TD.

Titanic Signature Project

Dr A McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) for an update on the Titanic Signature Project; and (ii) how her Department plans to involve local companies which are willing to contribute to this project.

(AQW 4733/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

(i) Update on Titanic Signature Project

The Titanic Signature Project (TSP) encompasses the key historic sites associated with Belfast's shipbuilding heritage and the story of Titanic. The sites include but are not limited to the Titanic and Olympic slipways, Harland & Wolff Drawing Offices, Lagan Legacy's MV Confiance, Titanic Dock & Pump House and SS Nomadic. At the heart of the TSP is the Titanic Signature Building (TSB). Construction work began in May 2009; progress has been excellent and all funders are confident of an April 2012 completion date, in time for the commemoration of the Titanic's maiden voyage.

Under the Titanic Signature Project (TSP), other Titanic and maritime heritage sites are being developed including plans for the creation of heritage trails across the city.

(ii) How DETI plans to involve local companies willing to contribute to this project

The Department is committed to supporting the economic and regeneration benefits of the Titanic Signature Project and realising the opportunities presented by this project.

The Department, and NITB as one of its key agencies and a significant funder of the TSP and Signature Building, seeks to ensure that everyone within the city has fair access to the

opportunities which emerge and that investors have direct access to the human resources and skills base available in Belfast.

NITB is fully supportive of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreed between Belfast City Council and Titanic Quarter Limited. This MOU is committed to working in partnership with public, private, voluntary and community sector organisations to create the necessary conditions to optimize the city and community benefits of the Titanic Quarter development, to demonstrate good corporate citizenship and to provide a recognised route for Titanic Quarter Limited's engagement with the city and community.

Titanic Signature Project

Dr A McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the Titanic Signature Project will benefit the local economy in Belfast City and the greater Belfast area.

(AQW 4734/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Titanic Signature Project includes the creation of a world class visitor attraction which brings the story of the Titanic home to Belfast. At the heart of the city's cultural and tourism strategy, the Titanic Signature Building is set to unlock the potential of the Titanic story to communicate with the city's people and its visitors. The attraction will showcase the Titanic story in the place where it was created and, in doing so will celebrate Northern Ireland's shipbuilding and industrial heritage.

The Titanic Signature Building will be unique and innovative in design, content and presentation. It will appeal to as wide an audience as possible, including children, adults, local residents and visitors, which will in turn attract more tourists. This will deliver real economic benefits to Belfast City and the greater Belfast area in terms of income, revenue and jobs. The attraction will be capable of generating repeat visits to ensure that it is financially sustainable.

The Titanic Signature Project includes a number of other developments that will combine with the Signature Building to create a compelling destination and in turn benefit the local economy. These developments will comprise:

- supporting facilities that will both draw more visitors to the site, including cafés, shops, hotels, bars etc. facing the plaza.
- features around the Titanic Signature Building that will add considerably to the visitor experience. These include the plaza around the iconic building, the slipways and other public sculptures on the plaza and slipways.

As part of the Titanic Signature Project, developments have already been completed which add to the overall visitor experience and attract tourists and therefore income, such as the development of the visitor facilities at Titanic's Dock and Pump-House.

Another planned development which will contribute to the local economy is the development of the former Harland & Wolff headquarters and drawing offices as a boutique hotel. A number of other hotels are also in development in the area.

The Titanic Signature Project will also drive the development of a series of heritage trails connecting Titanic and maritime heritage sites across Belfast, which will ensure that the economic benefit is spread across the city.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Northern Ireland Tourist Board provides information on accessible accommodation for visitors with a disability.

(AQW 4834/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) currently produces a single accommodation brochure which includes: Bed & Breakfasts, Caravanning and Camping Sites, Guesthouses, Hostels, Hotels and Self-Catering properties.

Accessibility advice is provided in the introductory statutory information pages and advises users that:

“NITB is currently developing processes in relation to accessible accommodation. In the short term we would recommend that you contact the accommodation provider directly to check if they can facilitate your needs”

As part of their individual marketing descriptions within the brochure, properties wishing to highlight their facilities and services are flagged with a standard line: ‘Please enquire about our accessibility’.

NITB is currently working on an information pack to provide the hotel sector with information and advice on accessible accommodation. This pack aims to improve the visitor experience for those with a disability.

Project Kelvin

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on Project Kelvin. (AQW 4894/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Project Kelvin is very close to completion with telecommunications facilities in place and operational at each of the 13 locations specified in the contract. At the Fort George site work is underway to transfer the equipment currently located in a container based Telehouse facility into a new building being provided by ILEX. This should be completed by the end March/early April 2010.

Testing of the overall network started in December 2009 and will continue until end March 2010 or completion of the Telehouse.

Unemployment Figures

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for a breakdown of the unemployment figures over the last 12 months in each constituency. (AQW 4924/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Robust unemployment figures at parliamentary constituency level are only available from the Claimant Count, which is a count of all those claiming unemployment related benefits. Claimant Count figures for each constituency area in each of the last twelve months are provided in the table below.

NUMBER OF UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT CLAIMANTS BY CONSTITUENCY AREA, FEB 2009 – JAN 2010

Parliamentary Constituency	Feb- 2009	Mar- 2009	Apr- 2009	May- 2009	Jun- 2009	Jul- 2009	Aug- 2009	Sep- 2009	Oct- 2009	Nov- 2009	Dec- 2009	Jan- 2010
Belfast East	1,387	1,470	1,576	1,635	1,718	1,849	2,001	1,993	1,984	1,992	1,990	2,096
Belfast North	2,585	2,699	2,771	2,915	2,939	3,045	3,154	3,187	3,220	3,246	3,240	3,407
Belfast South	2,011	2,127	2,247	2,330	2,359	2,544	2,679	2,582	2,531	2,607	2,629	2,730
Belfast West	3,998	4,086	4,222	4,348	4,452	4,582	4,672	4,713	4,657	4,567	4,557	4,715
East Antrim	2,185	2,303	2,471	2,439	2,524	2,605	2,747	2,751	2,730	2,734	2,760	2,926
East Londonderry	2,951	2,925	2,881	2,915	2,948	3,024	3,125	3,141	3,073	3,109	3,190	3,369
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	2,335	2,458	2,483	2,514	2,552	2,651	2,801	2,809	2,704	2,716	2,737	2,881
Foyle	4,057	4,171	4,258	4,395	4,549	4,811	4,914	4,899	4,813	4,699	4,748	5,023
Lagan Valley	1,799	1,898	1,983	2,036	2,086	2,166	2,285	2,251	2,211	2,123	2,139	2,307
Mid Ulster	2,318	2,394	2,504	2,607	2,658	2,790	2,919	2,885	2,770	2,758	2,825	2,979
Newry & Armagh	2,568	2,759	2,932	2,995	3,165	3,330	3,413	3,374	3,317	3,370	3,462	3,745
North Antrim	2,512	2,571	2,619	2,678	2,671	2,821	2,921	2,937	2,943	2,902	2,963	3,106
North Down	1,422	1,471	1,501	1,524	1,590	1,706	1,726	1,743	1,737	1,713	1,741	1,839
South Antrim	1,936	2,028	2,100	2,159	2,155	2,239	2,378	2,325	2,290	2,251	2,225	2,400
South Down	2,584	2,699	2,800	2,881	2,906	3,065	3,196	3,211	3,183	3,208	3,262	3,506
Strangford	1,683	1,795	1,834	1,886	1,888	1,981	2,048	2,100	2,124	2,100	2,123	2,275
Upper Bann	2,660	2,761	2,915	2,993	3,066	3,160	3,325	3,334	3,262	3,294	3,301	3,485
West Tyrone	2,636	2,671	2,760	2,807	2,913	3,061	3,207	3,257	3,185	3,150	3,192	3,381
Northern Ireland	43,627	45,286	46,857	48,057	49,139	51,430	53,511	53,492	52,734	52,539	53,084	56,170

Source: Northern Ireland Claimant Count

Renewable Heat Incentive: Legislation

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what communication she has had in relation to the proposed legislation on renewable heat incentive (as part of the Energy Bill) announced by the Department of Energy and Climate change; and (ii) if she has any plans to introduce similar legislation.

(AQW 4935/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) has announced that it intends to incentivise low carbon heating technologies through a Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) from April 2011. DECC has statutory powers to implement a RHI in England, Scotland and Wales via amendments to the Energy Act 2008, however Northern Ireland is not included in this measure.

The energy market in Northern Ireland is quite different to that in GB and therefore it is essential that any future method for encouraging renewable heat in NI takes this into account. In light of this, my Department has commissioned a significant piece of work to consider the potential for developing the renewable heat market in NI and assess options for encouraging the local market. If the evidence indicates that a RHI would be the most effective way of developing renewable heat in NI then a legislative timetable will need to be developed. My Department will also consider options for encouraging the market in the short term to ensure that NI is not unduly disadvantaged by the introduction of the RHI in GB and officials are maintaining close links with DECC colleagues as their proposals develop.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much has been spent to date on designing the creative element of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's brand.

(AQO 825/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In January 2008 NITB embarked on a project to develop a brand strategy for Northern Ireland Tourism. This was not specifically an NITB Brand. The objectives of the project were to create a framework to determine Northern Ireland's future product development, visitor experience and marketing communications.

NITB invested £150,000 developing and consulting on the brand strategy for Northern Ireland tourism. The primary aim was to define how tourism providers create uniquely Northern Ireland experiences. Of this, £30,000 was spent developing the creative and communications' strategy of the brand.

Credit Unions

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the Treasury about the delay in bringing forward legislation to extend the services provided by Credit Unions.

(AQO 826/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have written to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury seeking a meeting to discuss the issues surrounding the extension of credit union services here and am currently awaiting a response.

In the interim, my officials continue to work closely with Her Majesty's Treasury and the Financial Services Authority towards the achievement of this objective.

When implemented, the legislation will permit credit unions here to offer an extended range of services as well as access to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme and the Financial Ombudsman Service. The first step will be the issue of a joint DETI and Her Majesty's Treasury consultation exercise before the end of March 2010.

Credit Unions

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on any plans to give Credit Unions more powers to enable them to extend their services.

(AQO 827/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have written to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury seeking a meeting to discuss the issues surrounding the extension of credit union services here and am currently awaiting a response.

In the interim, my officials continue to work closely with Her Majesty's Treasury and the Financial Services Authority towards the achievement of this objective.

When implemented, the legislation will permit credit unions here to offer an extended range of services as well as access to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme and the Financial Ombudsman Service. The first step will be the issue of a joint DETI and Her Majesty's Treasury consultation exercise before the end of March 2010.

Businesses Connected to Broadband

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why only 85% of businesses are connected to broadband.

(AQO 828/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: All businesses in Northern Ireland can access broadband as a result of strategic investments made by DETI. However the decision on whether to take up broadband is ultimately a business decision for individual companies to make.

The purpose of the £3.9million Logon-NI programme launched by DETI is to stimulate business demand for broadband, by demonstrating the benefits access can bring. Based on information available through this service, it is estimated that some 64% of businesses in Northern Ireland are currently connected to a broadband service.

Renewable Energy

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she is taking to encourage the generation of renewable energy.

(AQO 829/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Following a full public consultation, I intend to bring forward a new Strategic Energy Framework which includes challenging targets for renewable electricity and heat. The Strategic Energy Framework will contain strategic actions to deliver these targets, for example, grid strengthening to accommodate higher levels of onshore and offshore renewable electricity and offshore renewable energy plans. In addition, my Department is undertaking work to ensure we have the right support mechanisms for renewable electricity and heat for Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation, or "NIRO" as it is commonly known, is the main support mechanism for incentivising renewable electricity generation. On 12 February 2010, I published proposals to change the NIRO from 1 April 2010 which included increased support for some forms of small-scale generation.

Redundancies

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the recent redundancies and closures announced by Visteon, Nortel, Baker Hughes and others, what steps her Department is taking to ensure that public funds, invested in companies for the purpose of creating jobs, can be recovered if those companies subsequently impose redundancies within a short timeframe.

(AQO 830/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: All grant assistance provided by Invest NI is bound by a legal letter of offer that contains terms and conditions associated with the project, including any specific employment obligations.

Each offer also includes definitions of what constitutes a breach of the agreement and how grant monies will be recovered in such circumstances. In instances of breach of the terms of any agreement, Invest NI will consider a range of factors in seeking to secure a grant repayment broadly commensurate with the proportion of the economic benefit foregone. This approach has resulted in over £28 million of grant monies being recovered from companies over the past five years.

Cruise Ships

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she is taking to improve berthing facilities for cruise ships visiting Belfast and visitor welcome opportunities in the city to create a better introduction to Northern Ireland.

(AQO 831/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The improvement of berthing facilities for cruise ships is not the responsibility of my department. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board provides funding of circa £300k to the Belfast Welcome Centre and is working with Belfast City Council on the Belfast Integrated Tourism Strategy. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board in conjunction with Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau also provides a range of welcome facilities for cruise ship passengers which include:

- A welcome desk on the ship providing visitor information;
- A welcome desk on the marshalling area providing visitor information;
- A welcome band on the quayside as the ship docks; and
- A free shuttle bus to and from the cruise ship providing passengers with access to the city centre and its attractions.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's support towards the welcome services equates to £20,000 per annum.

During 2009 Belfast Harbour Commissioners invested over £10 million pounds to extend Stormont Wharf quay by 250 meters. The quay extension took 2 years to deliver and was accompanied by hinterland redevelopment. This means that Belfast has the longest and deepest quay on the island of Ireland, providing multiple berthing facilities for large cruise ships. The quay extension was accompanied with marshalling facilities for coach operations. In addition the Belfast Harbour Commissioners have recently:

- Erected a 'Welcome to Belfast' banner on to the 'Larsen Building' facing the cruise ships; and
- Purchased a marquee to ensure passengers safe disembarkation from the ship. The marquee has been dressed with engaging imagery of Belfast supplied by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

During 2009 thirty five cruise ships were welcomed to Belfast, equating to 53,000 passengers and staff. In 2010 thirty eight cruise ships are expected which equates to 62,000 passengers and staff.

Avaya

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the Avaya plant closure and associated job losses in Monkstown.

(AQO 832/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: On 18 December 2009 Avaya completed its acquisition of Nortel's Enterprise Solutions business and assets, resulting in the transfer of around 138 staff employed by Nortel at Monkstown.

Together with Invest NI, I made significant efforts to persuade Avaya senior management to maintain and grow the company's presence in Northern Ireland.

As soon as Invest NI was made aware of Avaya's announcement to its employees at Monkstown in January, contact was made with senior management in the US to seek clarification of their position.

Unfortunately the company confirmed its intention to make a "strategic withdrawal" of its Manufacturing, Procurement and Logistics business in Northern Ireland and to enter a 90-day statutory consultation period with affected employees.

I can assure you that Invest NI continues to seek to identify and work with existing and new international Foreign Direct Investors in the ICT sector to secure alternative employment opportunities.

Renewable and Sustainable Energy

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department intends to put in place demand-led stimulus for renewable and sustainable energy.

(AQO 833/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Responses to the recent consultation on the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) 2010 were overwhelmingly supportive of a move to a GB-style feed-in tariff for small scale renewable electricity generation projects under 5MW.

While the NIRO has been a very successful incentive mechanism for large scale renewables, I understand that the feed-in tariff is simpler to operate and therefore may be more attractive in some respects than the Renewables Obligation to small-scale generators. However, Northern Ireland currently has no legislative powers for such a tariff.

My Department is currently examining the cost of introducing such a feed-in tariff here in Northern Ireland, however, I must give consideration to the fact that consumers, including businesses, are the ones that will ultimately have to pay the additional costs of further incentivisation. In making any decision about future support mechanisms, therefore, I will need to ensure that there is a balance between the benefits of further incentivising microgeneration and the cost implications for consumers and businesses.

Invest Northern Ireland

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the need to substantially reform Invest NI following the Independent Review of Economic Policy, the Matrix report, and changing regional and global economic conditions.

(AQO 834/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I made an announcement to the Assembly on 25 January 2010 in which I gave my response to the recommendations from the Independent Review of Economic Policy and set out the actions my department and Invest NI will take to address these. My aim is to improve the prospects for economic growth and higher living standards throughout the whole of Northern Ireland and I have put arrangements in place to ensure action is taken quickly.

As part of this process, I have asked Invest NI to consider a range of important issues including how it can deliver a tiered portfolio of support to accelerate innovation, research and development and export growth. As part of its response, and to help Invest NI address more effectively the current challenges facing businesses, the chief executive has launched a major transformation programme across the whole organisation.

My response to the Assembly can be found at www.detini.gov.uk

Department of the Environment

Lagan Valley Regional Park

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of the Environment if he can provide an assurance that cuts to the National Heritage grant will not adversely affect Lagan Valley Regional Park.

(AQW 4605/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): My Department, through the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, intends to continue funding the Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP) for the next three years. I have recently been able to make some additional funding available to the LVRP in 2010/11 but I regret that the overall level of funding will be lower than in previous years. I am confident that the additional funding will better place the LVRP to explore, with current and potential new funders, alternative ways of delivering and funding projects in the future.

Mobile Phone Masts

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria used when considering planning applications for mobile phone masts.

(AQW 4737/10)

Minister of the Environment: The relevant planning policy for the consideration of planning applications for mobile phone masts is set out in Planning Policy Statement 10, "Telecommunications". Supplementary planning guidance is also set out in DCAN 14 "Siting and Design of Radio Telecommunications Equipment". The main criteria in the assessment of such proposals include the visual and environmental impact, mast and site sharing opportunities and in terms of base stations, that when they are operational that they will meet the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) guidelines for public exposure to electromagnetic fields.

Passing Bays on the Ballycolin Road, Hannahstown

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the planning application for passing bays on the Ballycolin Road, Hannahstown; and when a final decision will be made.

(AQW 4796/10)

Minister of the Environment: A planning application for the installation of 5 No passing bays along the Ballycollin Road (north of Flowbog Road junction) and widening of Ballycollin/Flowbog Rd junction, was submitted to Planning Service on 16 November 2007.

Following consideration of the application and taking account of the relevant plan and policy provisions and all other material considerations, including third party representations, the application was initially presented to Lisburn City Council on 5 October 2009 with an opinion to approve. The application was deferred by Council for an office meeting which was held on 23 October 2009. Following a re-consideration of the application, it was again presented to Lisburn City Council on 1 February 2010 with an opinion to approve. At that meeting the Council requested that the Department hold the application for two weeks. The Department agreed to delay issuing the decision for two weeks. That two week period has now passed and the decision will issue on 24 February 2010.

Car Booster Seats: Legislation

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what legislation exists to ensure that small children travel in booster seats when in a moving car; and if he has any plans to review this legislation.

(AQW 4798/10)

Minister of the Environment: Seat belt legislation in Northern Ireland states that all children up to 135cms (approx 4ft 5ins) in height or up to 12 years of age (whichever occurs first) must use the appropriate child restraint. 'Child restraints' is the collective term used for baby seats, child seats, booster seats and booster cushions.

The law states that children under 3 years must use the child restraint appropriate for their weight in any vehicle (including vans and other goods vehicles). There is only one exception – a child under three years may travel unrestrained in the rear seat of a taxi if the correct child restraint is not available.

In vehicles where seat belts are fitted, children from 3 years and up to 135cms in height or 12 years of age (whichever occurs first) must use the correct child restraint. In the rear seat only, three exceptions allow these children to use an adult belt if the correct child restraint is not available: (1) in a taxi; (2)

for a short distance in an unexpected necessity; and (3) where two occupied child seats in the rear prevent the fitting of a third child seat.

Exceptions are only to be used in limited circumstances and do not apply to regular school runs or other journeys that are planned in advanced. It is the driver's responsibility to ensure that any child under 14 years of age uses a seat belt or correct child restraint and any child restraint used must conform to EU safety standard UN ECE 44.03 (or subsequent version of the same specification).

Failure to comply with the legislation on using appropriate child restraints attracts tough penalties – a fixed penalty fine of £60 and 3 penalty points or, on conviction at court, a maximum fine of up to £500.

The current seat belt legislation in Northern Ireland only came into force in February 2007, mirrors the legislative position in the rest of the UK, and is fully in line with EU requirements. I therefore have no plans to review at this time.

Local Government Reform Programme

Mr D Kennedy asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Local Government Reform Programme.

(AQW 4811/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which includes provisions to make preliminary arrangements for local government reorganisation progressed from its introduction to the Assembly on 22 June 2009 and was passed on 23 February 2010.

I hope to introduce the Local Government (Finance) Bill, which will modernise the financial framework within which local government will work, to the Assembly during March.

Policy proposals for the reorganisation of local government will be taken forward in the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill, which is currently with the Executive. These proposals have been cleared by the First Minister and, once approved by the deputy First Minister and the Executive, will be issued for consultation as early 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 2009.

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 (BSO). I have therefore, requested that local government, through NILGA, put forward their proposals on how the sector would propose to achieve regional collaboration to realise the expected benefits for ratepayers. The intention is to discuss these proposals in detail at the next Strategic Leadership Board on 25 February 2010.

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 Programme 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 including a realistic assessment of 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 any 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.

Planning Service

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to list all representations he has made in his capacity as a local elected representative to the planning service for developments in the Lagan Valley constituency in each of the last two years; and (ii) how he manages actual or potential conflicts of interest as the Minister responsible for the Planning Service.

(AQW 4813/10)

Minister of the Environment: Over the last two years in my role as a local elected representative I have made a total of 6 formal representations to the Planning Service for developments in the Lagan Valley constituency, 2 representations in 2008 and 4 representations in 2009. The details of these are provided below.

I am fully entitled to make representations about planning applications, provided there is no potential for conflict of interest. Such representations are treated in the same way as those from any other elected representative. A conflict of interest would only arise where I am involved in the final decision making process on an application and any such conflict will be avoided.

DETAILS OF REPRESENTATIONS MADE TO PLANNING SERVICE IN 2008

Planning Application Reference	Proposal	Location
Q/2007/0145/F	Replacement Dwelling	14 Tullindoney Road, Dromore
S/2007/1221/F	Change of Use from Office Accommodation to Funeral Directors	4 Sackville Street, Lisburn

DETAILS OF REPRESENTATIONS MADE TO PLANNING SERVICE IN 2009

Planning Application Reference	Proposal	Location
S/2008/1133/F	Apartment Development	No 27 & 33 Culcavey Road, Hillsborough
Q/2009/0133/F	Dwelling & Garage	60 metres south west of 4 Mackeys Lane, Dromore
Q/2007/0111/F	Residential Development	Land to the south of Church Street, Dromore
S/2009/0300/F	Residential Development	Ballantine Garden Village Phase 2, Hillhall Road, Lisburn

Public Relations Services

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment how much his Department has spent on public relations services from (i) PricewaterhouseCoopers; (ii) KMPG; (iii) Deloitte; and (iv) Weber Shandwick since devolution.

(AQW 4850/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department has not incurred any expenditure on these consultants for PR services since devolution.

PPS 21

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment when the final version of PPS21 will be published. (AQW 4879/10)

Minister of the Environment: I circulated PPS 21 for Executive clearance in December 2009 and will publish it when that clearance is received.

Planning Service: Shortcomings

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to address the shortcomings within the Planning Service highlighted in the Public Accounts Committee report. (AQW 4948/10)

Minister of the Environment: I am committed to reforming and improving the planning system and welcome all contributions, including those from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which will help with this process. My officials and I have recognised for some time a number of the issues identified in the PAC report and we have been seeking to address them. There has been a concerted focus on improving application processing times, with the streamlined council consultation arrangements and the Good Practice Guide playing their part in delivering improvements. Significant progress has also been made by the Strategic Project teams at headquarters, with 21 Article 31 applications representing investment in the region of £500 million, together with a further 17 applications of economic significance, being processed to recommendation or decision to date in 2009-10.

Clearly these are encouraging signs. However, I recognise that there is still some way to go. In this context, I have recently sought agreement from the Executive to the preparation of the necessary legislation to give effect to an extensive planning reform agenda, which follows our extensive public consultation process last year, and to make provision to transfer responsibility for many planning functions back to local government.

In terms of the specific recommendations in the PAC report, these will be carefully considered over the next few weeks and thereafter a formal Memorandum of Reply will be laid before the Assembly.

Equality Impact Assessments

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of the Environment what measures are included within Equality Impact Assessments conducted by his Department to ensure that the interests of people with identities outside the two perceived main traditions in Northern Ireland are taken into account. (AQW 4973/10)

Minister of the Environment: In accordance with the requirements of Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act), my Department has published an Equality Scheme which sets out how it will fulfil the duties imposed by the Act. It also closely follows Guidance produced by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to ensure that all its policies are assessed for potential significant impact on equality of opportunity between the nine categories as listed in Section 75 of the Act which includes persons of different religious belief, political opinion and racial group.

Strategic Project Teams

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning application the strategic project teams have dealt with. (AQW 4990/10)

Minister of the Environment: Two Strategic Projects teams at Planning Service Headquarters were created in late in 2007 to specifically handle all large scale investment planning proposals and to facilitate pre-application discussions.

Since April 2008 44 major strategic Article 31 applications have been processed to a recommendation or decision. In 2009/2010 so far, 21 Article 31 applications have been processed to a recommendation or decision representing investment in the region of £500 million plus the associated construction jobs and post development job creation.

In addition to Article 31 applications the Strategic Projects teams also process other applications of economic significance from across the Province. In 2009/2010 to date, a further 17 economically significant applications have also been processed to a decision including Radox Laboratories (£15m) and a new factory for Bombardier (£300m and part of an overall £520m).

Within the Programme for Government there is a commitment to process large scale strategic investment planning proposals within 6 months provided there have been pre-application discussions. To date, 10 applications have met the criteria to apply the PfG 6 month target. Of these 6 have been processed on target with the remaining 4 on track for achievement, i.e. 100% record to date.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Servants: Staff Grievances

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the total number of staff grievances brought by civil servants against their employer in each of the last five years; (ii) the number of these grievances which (a) were upheld; (b) were dismissed; and (c) are outstanding; (iii) the number of cases which resulted in compensation being awarded to the employee; and (iv) the sum total of the compensation paid.

(AQW 4516/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The information requested can only be provided from October 2007 when HRConnect was introduced. The figures are detailed overleaf. Prior to this the figures were not readily available due to differing recording methods in Departments and the absence of a central database recording the statistics.

Year	Oct 2007/08	2008/09
Number of Grievances	61	190
Number of Grievances Upheld	12	19
Number of Grievances dismissed	30	71
Number of Grievances Outstanding	11	83
Number of Grievances resulting in compensation being awarded to the employee	0	0
Sum total of the compensation paid	0	0

Deaths

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of deaths as a result of (i) coronary heart disease; (ii) cancer; (iii) chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; and (iv) diabetes related illnesses, in 2009.

(AQW 4760/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: In Northern Ireland during the first three quarters of 2009^P there have been 1,730 deaths registered due to coronary heart disease¹, 2,905 deaths registered due to cancer², 564 deaths registered due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease³ and 174 deaths registered due to diabetes related illnesses⁴. Provisional data for the complete 2009 registration year will not be available until the end of March 2010.

- 1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes I20-I25
 - 2 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes C00-C97
 - 3 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes J40-J44
 - 4 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes E10-E14
- P 2009 data is provisional

Age of Mothers

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of children who have been born to mothers aged (i) 14 years or under; (ii) 15 years; (iii) 16 years; (iv) 17 years; (v) 18 years; and (vi) 19 years, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4843/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Table 1 below shows the number of resident live births and stillbirths in Northern Ireland registered to mothers aged 19 and under from 2004 to 2009 Quarter 1 to Quarter 3P.

Table 1: Resident Live Births and Stillbirths registered in Northern Ireland to Mothers Aged 19 and under, 2004-2009 Q1-Q3P

Mother's Age	Registration Year / Period					
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009 Q1-Q3 ^P
14 years and under	5	6	7	5	6	5
15 years	34	29	29	31	34	22
16 years	133	110	113	106	108	81
17 years	274	286	257	236	253	188
18 years	471	417	435	426	441	310
19 years	580	557	591	604	593	392

P Provisional data

Civil Service: Absenteeism

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the precise methodology used by his Department to calculate the monetary cost of absenteeism in the Civil Service.

(AQW 4856/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency is responsible for calculating the monetary cost of absenteeism in the Civil Service. The methodology used is as follows:

Salaries: For each individual an estimated daily rate is calculated by taking their Full-time equivalent Annual Pay Rate and dividing by 261 (i.e. weekdays in a year). This daily rate is then incurred for each standard working day lost (a standard working day is equivalent to 7.4 hours). Adjustments to take account of half-rate, pension-rate and unpaid standard working days of absence are also incorporated into this calculation.

Allowances: Any allowances paid to an individual are factored down to a daily rate based on each individual's available working days. This daily rate is then incurred for each standard working day lost.

Employer's National Insurance Contribution: This is estimated for each individual based on the salary and allowance costs previously calculated and the relevant HM Revenue & Customs rules.

Employer's Accruing Superannuation Liability Charge (ASLC): This is estimated for each individual based on the salary and allowance costs previously calculated and each individual's ASLC rate.

All four of these costing elements are combined to give an estimated monetary cost of absenteeism.

Non-departmental Public Bodies: Operating Costs

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the annual operating costs of each non-departmental public body in the last financial year.

(AQW 4867/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Details of the operating costs for non-departmental public bodies (NDPB's) sponsored, by the Northern Ireland departments are included in the attached annex. The figures refer to the 2008/09 financial year, which is the most recent information available.

Several bodies, including public corporations, special agencies and other bodies which, although not strictly NDPB's, have also been included, as they are listed in the annual Public Bodies report.

ANNEX A

Public Bodies Expenditure 2008/09		
Organisation	Spend £	Comments
Department for Employment and Learning		
Construction Industry Training Board Northern Ireland	1,208,604	unaudited
Fair Employment Tribunal	3,322,741	unaudited
Labour Relations Agency	3,200,000	
Northern Ireland Industrial Court	17,800	
Northern Ireland Industrial Tribunals	0	unaudited
Ulster Supported Employment Ltd	7,740,669	
Department for Regional Development		
Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company	187,790,000	Public Corporation
Northern Ireland Water	290,600,000	
Department for Social Development		
Charities Advisory Committee	0	
Charity Commission for Northern Ireland	0	
Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board for Northern Ireland	0	
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	795,911,000	
Vaughan's Charity Trustees	0	Other Bodies
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development		
Agricultural Wages Board Northern Ireland	0	

Public Bodies Expenditure 2008/09		
Organisation	Spend £	Comments
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute	47,432,000	
Drainage Council for Northern Ireland	0	
Livestock and meat Commission for Northern Ireland	4,410,000	
Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority	2,349,205	
Research and Education Advisory Panel	0	
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure		
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	20,502,641	
Fisheries Conservancy Board for Northern Ireland	900,000	unaudited
National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland	24,426,000	unaudited
Northern Ireland Museums Council	437,879	
Sport Northern Ireland	24,468,000	unaudited
Department of Education		
Belfast Education and Library Board	315,776,977	
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	3,733,197	
Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd	804,442	
North Eastern Education and Library Board	324,842,605	
NI Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment	30,466,903	
South Eastern Education and Library Board	266,264,000	
Southern Education and Library Board	331,463,000	
Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards	375,000	
Western Education and Library Board	346,800,000	
Youth Council for Northern Ireland	4,349,000	
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment		
General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland	2,443,398	
Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland	4,476,256	
Invest Northern Ireland	167,593,000	
Northern Ireland Tourist Board	13,190,000	
Department of Finance and Personnel		
Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee		
Statistics Advisory Committee	7	
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety		
Care Tribunal		

Public Bodies Expenditure 2008/09		
Organisation	Spend £	Comments
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	1,171,986,000	
Eastern Health and Social Services Council	283,000	
Health and Social Care Trusts	3,262,196,000	unaudited
Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland	649,544	
Northern Health and Social Services Board	683,985,000	
Northern Health and Social Services Council	185,796	
Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service	26,177,000	H&PSS Special Agency
Northern Ireland Central Services Agency	85,387,144	
Northern Ireland Clinical and Excellence Awards Committee	6,100,000	
Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service	80,422,000	Other Bodies
Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency	3,425,547	
Northern Ireland Health Promotion Agency	6,200,000	
Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency	49,412,020	
Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery	1,170,274	
Northern Ireland Regional Medical Physics Agency	6,352,802	
Northern Ireland Social Care Council	3,280,129	
Poisons Board		
Southern Health and Social Services Board	540,806,000	
Southern Health and Social Services Council	205,302	unaudited
The Regulation & Improvement Quality Authority	6,291,000	
Tribunal Under Schedule 11 to the Health and Personal Social Services (NI) Order		Other Bodies
Western Health and Social Services Board	489,502,000	
Western Health and Social Services Council	170,000	
Department of the Environment		
Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside	0	
Historic Buildings Council	0	
Historic Monuments Council	0	
Local Government Staff Commission for Northern Ireland	734,000	
Northern Ireland Local Government Officer Superannuation Committee	133,776,000	

Public Bodies Expenditure 2008/09		
Organisation	Spend £	Comments
Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister		
Commission for Victims and survivors	760,000	
Commissioner for Children and Young People	1,853,000	unaudited
Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland	1,117,905	
Ilex Urban Regeneration Company Ltd	3,600,000	
Older Peoples Advocate	0	Other Bodies
Planning Appeals Commission	2,523,000	
Statute Law Committee for Northern Ireland	0	
Strategic Investment Board Northern Ireland	9,035,000	
Water Appeals Commission	0	
Total	9,804,879,787	

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the work of the Ministerial Working Group on the Presbyterian Mutual Society; and when it will bring forward its proposals.
(AQW 4902/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Ministers on the Working Group continue to engage extensively in seeking a fair resolution to this complex case. There have been a number of related issues at play that are material to the deliberations of ministers such as the recent legal judgement of Judge Deeny.

We need to liaise closely with the Administrator in considering these matters. There are therefore still a number of complex legal, financial and regulatory issues that need to be addressed. Unfortunately, this takes time and the ongoing work must remain confidential. Rest assured that we continue to seek a resolution that is fair and equitable to PMS savers and are making every effort to resolve this issue as quickly as possible.

Equality Impact Assessments

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are included within Equality Impact Assessments conducted by his Department to ensure that the interests of people with identities outside the two perceived main traditions in Northern Ireland are taken into account.
(AQW 4977/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: When conducting an Equality Impact Assessment, my Department adheres to The Guide to Statutory Duties, issued by the Equality Commission, which outlines the statutory arrangements under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

This mechanism allows policies to be assessed in order to determine whether they have an adverse differential impact on equality of opportunity for the nine Section 75 categories. The relevant categories include persons of different religious belief, racial grouping and political opinion.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Staff

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many staff work in each department of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and at what grade.

(AQW 1934/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The number of staff in the Belfast HSC Trust by staff group can be found in the Key Facts Workforce Bulletin on the DHSSPS website at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/work_force/stats-research.htm

Hospital Vending Machines

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2082/09, if he has given further consideration to introducing a ban on hospital vending machines selling junk food, similar to the ban in place in Wales.

(AQW 4524/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The issue of healthy vending machines is being considered by the Food and Nutrition Advisory Group which is one of four specialist Advisory Groups contributing to a new 10 year Obesity Prevention Strategic Framework which is expected to be completed later this year.

Evergreen Centre at Gransha Health Care Park, Derry

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 4273/10, (i) to detail the changes and actions stipulated by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority for the registration of the Evergreen Centre at Gransha Health Care Park in Derry; (ii) to indicate the estimated cost of such actions; (iii) if he can confirm whether additional funding will be provided to the Western Health and Social Care Trust for these works; and (iv) to provide an indicative time-line for registration.

(AQW 4544/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) has requested an action plan to demonstrate compliance with:

- fire risk recommendations;
- recommended standards for fire fighting equipment;
- recommended standards for emergency lighting installation;
- requirements for fire door checks;
- provision of fire safety training for staff;
- periodic inspection and testing of fixed electrical installation recommendations;
- legionellae risk assessment recommendations; and
- anti-scald risk assessment recommendations.

RQIA has also requested:

- removal from use of the water boiler located in the redundant servery;
- development of suitable health and safety policy and procedures relating to the picture-framing workshop;
- removal of all redundant equipment and refurbish areas, including all unused soft relaxation rooms, poolroom, kitchen/canteen and all other areas containing surplus equipment; and

- a review of the staffing levels to address the increased dependency needs of service users.
- (ii) The estimated cost of these actions is £96,000.
- (iii) The Western HSC Trust has secured £15,000 per annum and has made this available to address the staffing levels. There is a requirement to invest over £900K to facilitate the registration of day care facilities across the Trust and the 81k minor capital works costs associated with the Evergreen Centre is part of this. Due to current financial constraints the minor capital works programme has been delayed but these issues will be progressed as funding becomes available.
- (iv) Registration can proceed as soon as RQIA's recommendations are demonstrated as having been implemented satisfactorily.

Sunbeds: Danger

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department has done to raise awareness of the danger of sunbeds.

(AQW 4566/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cross-sectoral Northern Ireland Melanoma Implementation Group (NIMSIG), which leads implementation of my Department's 1997 Melanoma Strategy, has highlighted the risks of sunbed usage through public information campaigns. These efforts have contributed to the removal of all sunbeds from local District Council leisure facilities. NIMSIG also organised a conference in 2009 at which experts from the UK and Europe presented evidence on the dangers of sunbeds to raise awareness of the adverse health effects.

In addition to raising awareness, my Department is considering a range of measures for the regulation of the sunbed industry in Northern Ireland.

Sunbed Industry

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has any plans to introduce legislation to regulate the sunbed industry.

(AQW 4567/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aiming to introduce a Sunbed Bill in the Assembly before the summer recess.

Efficiency Savings

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the 3% efficiency savings planned for the Public Health Agency.

(AQW 4585/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Public Health Agency (PHA) is required to deliver very significant savings on the pre-RPA running costs of commissioning functions now undertaken by it. These savings represent a reduction of 25% on back office administration and 12.5% on professional managers. These RPA savings count towards the Department's overall 3% cumulative CSR efficiency target and the £53m savings HSC organisations will deliver under RPA.

Health Promotion Agency

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were employed in the Health Promotion Agency before it became the Public Health Agency.

(AQW 4586/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health Promotion Agency (HPA) did not become the Public Health Agency. Some former HPA staff were re-deployed to both the Public Health Agency and the Business Services Organisation.

At 31 March 2009 there were 53 people employed by the Health Promotion Agency.

Health Promotion Agency

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the cost was of running the Health Promotion Agency in the last financial year .

(AQW 4587/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The 2008/09 running costs for the Northern Ireland Health Promotion Agency totalled £6.2M.

Flu Vaccine

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the cost is to the Health Service, this financial year to date, of administering the common flu vaccine.

(AQW 4593/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: GPs are paid a fee of £7.51 to administer each dose of seasonal flu vaccine. As of 30 November 2009 more than 319,000 individuals had received the vaccine. Trusts organise clinics to vaccinate front line health and social care staff and it is not possible to quantify the costs associated with these clinics.

Osteomyelitis

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3755/10, what strategies are being employed by his Department to reduce the number of cases of osteomyelitis.

(AQW 4607/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts use a range of measures to reduce the number of cases of osteomyelitis. These include the prompt and appropriate treatment of all cases including those which occur naturally in the bone and those resulting from penetrating injuries and open fractures. In addition, work is on-going to reduce healthcare associated infections including the pre-operative screening of patients.

Coiling as a Treatment for Brain Aneurysms

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of coiling as a treatment for brain aneurysms.

(AQW 4613/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As part of my Department's formal link with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) in July 2006, Northern Ireland joined with England, Scotland and Wales as full participants in the Interventional Procedures Programme. NICE have issued interventional procedure guidance for coil embolisation of unruptured and ruptured intracranial aneurysms advising that current evidence on the safety and efficacy of this procedure is adequate.

As the Institute's guidance on this procedure was issued prior to formal links with NICE, they have not been formally endorsed by my Department however, they can be considered as reflecting best practice by clinicians and commissioners within the HSC.

Video Conferencing

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what use has been made of video conferencing in providing a more efficient service within his Department and the Health and Social Care Trusts; and for an estimate of the total savings that have been made as a result of this technology.

(AQW 4624/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I fully encourage the use of videoconferencing to promote more efficient working in my Department. Staff have been advised that, where feasible, this facility should be used to replace travel to meetings.

Records that are available show that the videoconferencing facilities in Castle Buildings, Stormont is used approximately 100 times per year and at Centre House, Belfast approximately 260 times per year. There are 42 other videoconferencing facilities in Health and Social Care Trust premises but records are not available on their usage.

No information is held which would quantify the level of savings made as a result of using this technology.

Cardiac Rehabilitation Centre at Belfast City Hospital

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the plans for the Cardiac Rehabilitation Centre located in the Wakehurst Building in Belfast City Hospital, given that no action has been taken since the announcement in 2006 that the building was due to be demolished. **(AQW 4627/10)**

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of the announcement in 2006 and would confirm that there has been no decision to demolish the Wakehurst Building at the Belfast City Hospital.

Oasis Dentistry

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in rolling out the contract awarded to Oasis Dentistry to provide more Health Service dentists; and when and where the service will be provided in the Carrickferus and Newtownabbey districts. **(AQW 4636/10)**

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As you are aware I announced in May 2009 that the Department had awarded a tender to Oasis Dental Care Ltd for additional dental services which will result in 38 additional dentists being available in various areas of Northern Ireland. I can confirm that excellent progress has been made. The first practices in Enniskillen and Londonderry opened on Monday, 16 November 2009 and we are currently on schedule for the rest being operational within the next 3-4 months.

Subject to planning permission, it is intended that the Carrickfergus Oasis dental practice will be based at Lancastrian Street, Carrickfergus and is scheduled to open in late March 2010. The Newtownabbey Oasis dental practice will be based at 350 Antrim Road, Glengormley, Newtownabbey and is also scheduled to open in late March 2010, again subject to planning permission.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Private Companies Contracted

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if all private companies contracted by Health and Social Care Trusts are obliged to operate to specific approved criteria; and if such companies are subject to scrutiny and auditing by his Department. **(AQW 4654/10)**

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Responsibility for the terms of a contract entered into by a Health and Social Care Trust is a matter for the relevant Trust chief executive. It is, however, my Department's policy that procurement of goods and services by health and social care organizations be subject, wherever possible, to guidance or contracting arrangements agreed or supported by a recognised Centre of Procurement Expertise. In complying with such guidance, a Trust would be satisfying itself as to, for example, the appropriateness of criteria specified in a contract, the capacity of the bidders to meet contractual obligations, and subsequent performance against criteria specified in the contract.

Southern Health and Social Care Trust: Private Companies Contracted

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3634/10, to list the 30 private companies contracted by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, including the areas they cover.

(AQW 4655/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following table lists the 30 private companies and their locality of service provision.

Name of Provider	Locality of Service Provision
Ann's Homecare	A&D, C&B
Care Force CMS	N&M
Care Plus	A&D, C&B
Darkley & District Community Association (brand name CarePoint NI)	A&D initially (new provider)
Derg Valley Care	N&M initially (new provider)
Enable Care Services	A&D, N&M
Everyday Care (DDA)	A&D
Extra Care	C&B, N&M
Fermanagh Home Care	A&D
Firs Homecare Sevices	A&D
Forever Care	A&D, N&M
Glencaring Services	A&D
Guardian Homecare	A&D, N&M, C&B
Homecare NI Ltd	A&D, C&B, N&M
Leonard Chesire	C&B
Lydian Care	N&M initially (new provider)
Miriams CVDC	A&D
Moneydarragh Flexicare	N&M
Mount Zion Community Care (Shankhill Community Care)	C&B
PCP - Personalised Care Partnership	A & D initially (new provider)
Peaceheaven	N&M
Phoenix Nursing Care Agency (Dom Care Division)	N&M
Premier Care	A&D
Provincial Care Services	A&D, N&M
Rathmourne	N&M

Name of Meals Provider	Locality of Service Provision
Domestic Care Services	A&D, C&B
Tumilty Diners	N&M
Jim & Mary Finnegan Catering	N&M
Sloan's Meals (Camlough Diners)	N&M
Pheonix	C&B

Key

A&D = Armagh and Dungannon

C&B = Craigavon and Banbridge

N&M= Newry and Mourne

Theft of Patient Files

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to address the theft of patient files from a County Down GP surgery.

(AQW 4657/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Care Board, in conjunction with the Business Services Organisation, are working closely with the GP surgery concerned to provide support with the rebuilding of patient records, together with support to enhance existing security arrangements. Assistance is also being provided to the Police Service of Northern Ireland's investigation.

Rickets

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of rickets have been diagnosed in children aged (i) 3 years or younger; (ii) 4-11 years; and (iii) 12-16 years, in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 4669/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available on the number of cases of rickets which have been diagnosed in children aged (i) 3 years or younger; (ii) 4-11 years; and (iii) 12-16 years.

Public Health Agency Management Costs

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the annual management costs of the Public Health Agency.

(AQW 4670/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The annual management costs of the Public Health Agency are expected to be in the region of £15.2m, which covers their salaries and wages as well as goods & services costs. The salary budget is £13.4m which covers 220 full time staff.

Unpaid Carers

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an estimate of the number of people providing unpaid care.

(AQW 4672/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people providing unpaid care is not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Psychological Therapy

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the current average; and (ii) longest waiting time for (a) assessment for psychological therapy; and (b) subsequent treatment beginning.

(AQW 4673/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested.

Addiction Holding Ward in the Ulster Hospital

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to move the addiction holding ward in the Ulster Hospital away from A&E.

(AQW 4675/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that the ward in question is not an addictions holding ward. It is an observation ward which is integrated with A&E and managed by the same medical and nursing team as A&E. Certain types of patients are admitted to this ward for no more than 24 hours for assessment and observation. Most of the patients within the observation ward go home within 24 hours and a small number will be admitted to the main hospital for further investigation or treatment.

A & E Department in the Ulster Hospital

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact on service provision at the A&E department of the Ulster Hospital when A&E staff also have to attend to patients in the addiction holding ward.

(AQW 4676/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that the ward in question is not an addictions holding ward. It is an observation ward which is integrated with A&E and managed by the same medical and nursing team as A&E. Certain types of patients are admitted to this ward for no more than 24 hours for assessment and observation. Most of the patients within the observation ward go home within 24 hours and a small number will be admitted to the main hospital for further investigation or treatment.

Removal of Patient from the Ulster Hospital

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why PSNI officers, 2 security staff, 2 social workers and 2 ambulance personnel were required to move one patient from the holding ward of the Ulster Hospital to Lagan Valley Hospital on 5 February 2010.

(AQW 4677/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It would not be appropriate to publicly disclose information about an individual patient's care or treatment as to do so would be likely to breach that patient's right to confidentiality.

Cosmetic Procedures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the cosmetic procedures that are available through the Health Service.

(AQW 4684/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No cosmetic procedures are carried out by the Northern Ireland Health Service. However, a number of plastic and maxillo facial surgical procedures are carried out at the Ulster Hospital as a result of trauma, cancer and facial deformity. All procedures conform with the 2006 policy document "A Policy To Make Best Use of Resources in Plastic Surgery

and Related Specialties” which states that clear clinical criteria will be used to determine whether a patient should have surgery.

A list of available procedures is shown in Appendix 1 of the document which can be accessed at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_a_policy_to_make_best_use_of_resources_in_plastic_surgery_and_related_specialties__205_kb_.pdf

Unpaid Carers

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to estimate the number of unpaid carers in the East Antrim constituency.

(AQW 4693/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of unpaid carers in the East Antrim constituency is not collected centrally.

Downe Hospital

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of press reports on 10 February that Accident and Emergency night services may be cut and beds reduced at the Downe Hospital, to provide details of all changes or anticipated changes at the hospital.

(AQW 4699/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and social care services are facing significant financial pressure and if the draft budget is approved by the Assembly, must deliver savings of £113 million on top of the existing £700 million efficiency savings already required. Like the rest of the service, the South Eastern Trust is considering a number of ways in which it can make better use of resources.

No decisions have yet been taken regarding any changes the delivery of services at the Downe Hospital.

Dementia

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money was invested in the care and treatment of dementia in the last financial year.

(AQW 4703/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: An exact cost of health and social care services provided for people with dementia in Northern Ireland cannot be obtained because people with dementia often have other health and social care needs which are also being met and people with dementia often use services which are not earmarked as being specifically for people with dementia.

Care and Retirement Homes

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what protection there is for people who reside in care/retirement homes.

(AQW 4706/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A range of legislative and procedural measures are in place to protect vulnerable people, regardless of their physical and mental health or where they live. These include the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order 2007, the Regional Adult Protection Policy and Procedural Guidelines, and the Joint Protocol for Investigation of Alleged Incidents of Abuse which was developed in partnership with the PSNI and several other statutory bodies. The Vetting and Barring Scheme, which is aimed at preventing unsuitable individuals from working with vulnerable groups, requires all individuals who work in certain positions with children, or vulnerable adults, to be registered with the Independent Safeguarding Authority by November 2010.

In January 2008 my Department introduced Minimum Care Standards for residential and nursing homes which specify the facilities, processes and training/qualifications necessary for the delivery of

a quality service. RQIA use the standards to assess and report on the quality of services delivered by HSC and independent providers across Northern Ireland.

A&E Department in the Ulster Hospital

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to increase staff levels at the Accident and Emergency Unit in the Ulster Hospital, in particular at weekends, to ensure safety and good service provision.

(AQW 4711/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust advises that the accident and emergency department at the Ulster Hospital has appropriate staffing levels in place.

Brain Injury Survivor Groups: Funding

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what guidelines were issued to statutory and interested voluntary groups working with brain injury survivors, who wished to apply for a portion of the additional £350,000 funding announced in September 2009; (ii) if any of this money has been allocated; and (iii) to detail these allocations.

(AQW 4863/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is assumed this question refers to the £300,000 of additional CSR funding for brain injury services allocated to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust on a capitation basis. At a Brain Injury Planning Workshop hosted by the Southern Trust on 13 May 2009, four priority areas for expenditure against any future capitation funding were identified by participants, including service users, carers and the voluntary and statutory sectors. It was agreed that all interested parties would develop service proposals, in line with these priorities, which were fit for purpose, provided good value for money and complemented the work of the Regional Acquired Brain Injury Implementation Group. Funding allocations are under active consideration as the Trust is currently reviewing all bids received against the set criteria.

Orthodontic Treatment

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children of school age in County Fermanagh who have had Health Service orthodontic treatment; and the total cost of this treatment, in (i) 2006/07; (ii) 2007/08; and (iii) 2008/09.

(AQW 4958/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Table 1: The number of children of school age¹ in County Fermanagh² who have had Health Service³ orthodontic treatment; and the total cost of this treatment, in (i) 2006/07; (ii) 2007/08; and (iii) 2008/09.

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Number of children of school age who have had Health Service orthodontic treatment	264	188	176
Total cost of treatment ⁴	£83,530	£65,301	£66,228

Source: Family Practitioner Services - HSC Business Services Organisation

Notes:

- 1 Children of school age are defined as children of compulsory school age, i.e. 4 to 15 inclusive.
- 2 Patients were identified as being located in County Fermanagh based on their postcode of residence; a small proportion of postcodes could not be attributed to a geographical location.
- 3 Cost does not include health service orthodontic care provided in the secondary care sector by the Western Health & Social Care Trust, these costs could only be identified with disproportionate resource implications.

- 4 Includes only specific 'Orthodontic Treatment' items. Does not include fees for assessment and diagnostic tests along with block grant payments as these fees are paid out along with fees for general dentistry and again can only be identified with disproportionate resource implications.

Psychotherapy, Personality Disorder and Assertive Outreach Services

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' assertion that Northern Ireland still lags behind England and Wales in the provision of psychotherapy, personality disorder and assertive outreach services; and if he can give an assurance that the current spending plans will not in any way impact on the implementation of the Bamford Review proposals.

(AQW 4983/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Our mental health services have been chronically underfunded for over a generation. Investment in these services has not kept pace with the rest of the UK. It is estimated that our mental health needs are at least 25% greater than England and we invest 25% less in services than they do.

I made mental health and learning disability my top priorities and secured an extra £54m in the Comprehensive Spending Round to start to develop mental health services in line with Bamford.

My Department is currently faced with delivering £700m of efficiencies and a further budget cut of £113m. At the same time demand for healthcare is rising at 9%. Whilst I will endeavour to protect vulnerable people, such as those with a mental health need, I cannot guarantee that these additional cuts will not impact on frontline services.

Department for Regional Development

Northern Ireland Water

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all procurement contracts awarded by NI Water, with a value of more than £10,000, since the company came into existence.

(AQW 4663/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the procurement contracts listed below, with a value more than £10,000, have been awarded by NIW since it was appointed water and sewerage undertaker on 1 April 2007.

I) TENDERS

Contract Details	Date Awarded
C081-07 - De-Sludging of Septic Tanks	01/04/2007
C133-07 - Supply and Delivery of Bottled Water	01/04/2007
C277-07 - Occupational Health Services	01/04/2007
C285-07 - Internal Audit Services	01/04/2007
C286-07 - External Audit Services	01/04/2007
C297-07 - WAMITAB Appointment of Assessors	01/05/2007
C222-07 - Collection, Transportation and Disposal of Sewage Sludge Cake	08/05/2007
C045-07e - Miscellaneous Electrical Sundries	01/06/2007
C056-07 - Heavy Mechanical Maintenance	09/07/2007

Contract Details	Date Awarded
C294-07 - Periodic Electrical Installation	18/07/2007
C044-07 - Miscellaneous Mechanical Sundries	01/08/2007
C006-07 - Surface Boxes and Manhole Cover (Castings)	20/08/2007
C019-07 - Hire of Vehicles and Plant	03/09/2007
C062-07 - Maintenance of Chlorine Equipment	01/10/2007
C071-07 - Supply of Techs for Maintenance of Equipment. in the fields of Instrumentation/Radio/Telemetry	01/10/2007
C142-07 - Inspection of Lifting equipment and Pressure Systems	01/10/2007
C054-07 - Servicing, Repairs and Modifications to Generator Sets	16/10/2007
C203-07 - Supply and Delivery of Leakage Data Logging Equipment	12/11/2007
C037-07 - Chlorination Equipment and Spare Parts	27/11/2007
C061-07 - Manufacture of and Modification to Instrument and Switch Panels	27/11/2007
C060-07 - Process Instruments and Automatic Control Equipment	03/12/2007
C259-07 - Collection, Transportation and Disposal of Incinerator Ash	04/12/2007
C058-07 - Electrical Installation and Repair Work	13/12/2007
T001-07 - Supply & Delivery of Vans & Dual Purpose Vehicles	27/12/2007
C313-08 - Insurance Brokerage for NIW	01/01/2008
C312-08 - Tax advisers	01/02/2008
C004-08 - Pipes & Fittings	11/03/2008
C316-08 - The provision & maintenance of Multifunctional products	01/04/2008
C293-08 - Professional Resourcing Partner	10/06/2008
C140-08 - Leakage Management Services	01/07/2008
C317-08 - Provision of Autocad Licences	04/07/2008
C012-08 - Hydraulic control valves and fittings	22/07/2008
C309-08 - Service Repairs & Maintenance Project	01/08/2008
C304-08 - Disposal of NIW Surplus Vehicles Plant & Equipment	01/10/2008
C332-08 - Supply of Electricity to NIW	01/10/2008
C333-08 - Provision of Estates Professional Services	13/10/2008
C321-08 - Delivery for Unit Cost Database for NIW	27/10/2008
C018-08 - Collection and Disposal of Waste by Skip	01/11/2008
C325-08 - Supply,Delivery, Installation & Maintenance of Bufferless Chlorine Residual Monitors	18/11/2008
C059-08 - Repairing and Rewinding of Electric Motors	24/11/2008
C334-08 - Trial for Auto-Coagulation at Water Treatment Works	30/11/2008
C289-06 - Supply of online pH measurement systems at WTW's	05/12/2008

Contract Details	Date Awarded
C328-08 - Framework for the Provision of Professional Consultancy Services	08/12/2008
C013-08 - Supply and Delivery of Chemicals	01/01/2009
C139-08 - Supply, Delivery of Leakage Control Panels, Kiosks and Associated Equipment	01/01/2009
C302-07 - ICT Service Delivery Partnership	06/01/2009
C055-08 - Supply, Maintenance, Testing and Certification of Lifting Equipment	01/02/2009
C335-08 - Maintenance of Telecoms Network	01/03/2009
C353-09 – Rationalisation of NIW Office Accommodation	01/03/2009
C343-08 - Water Resource Management Plan 2010	23/03/2009
C391 - Supply of Natural Gas within NIW Sites	01/04/2009
C352-09 - Supply & Installation of Combined Storm Overflow Remote Monitoring Equipment	20/04/2009
C347-08 - Provision of Web Services	21/05/2009
C241-08 - Supply,Delivery,Installation and Repair of Submersible Pumps	01/06/2009
C324-08 - Buoy Maintenance	01/06/2009
T004-09 - Repair & Maintenance Of Vehicles & Mobile Plant	01/06/2009
T005-09 - Bodywork for vehicles and mobile plant	01/06/2009
T017-09 - Spare Parts for Vans and Derivatives (Service Wide)	08/06/2009
C007-08 - Cold Water Meters and AMR	18/06/2009
C298-09 - External Claims Handling	01/07/2009
C341-09 - Full Service Marketing Agency	01/07/2009
C348-08 - Provision of Temporary Workers & Temporary Engineering Technicians	01/07/2009
C351-09 - Analytical Services:Water, Wastewater and Trade Effluent Quality analysis	01/07/2009
C351-09 - Analytical Services:Collection and Transportation Of Water Quality samples	01/07/2009
C363-09 - Wizcon annual maintenance	01/07/2009
C367-09 - MWM Operating Platform.	03/07/2009
C368-09 - Service & maintenance of UPS backup.	03/07/2009
C369-09 - Mobile simms for MVM tough books.	03/07/2009
C370-09 - Offsite co-location of servers.	03/07/2009
C371-09 - Line rental into Customer Contact Centre 0845++ numbers.	03/07/2009
C372-09 - Service and maintenance of hardware.	03/07/2009
C373-09 - Customer Billing & Contacts.	03/07/2009
C374-09 - Software provider.	03/07/2009
C375-09 - Software provider.	03/07/2009

Contract Details	Date Awarded
C376-09 - Service and maintenance of hardware.	03/07/2009
C377-09 - Service and maintenance of hardware.	03/07/2009
C378-09 - Kodak i620 scanner & maintenance.	03/07/2009
C379-09 - Escrow account for MWM Operating Platform.	03/07/2009
C380-09 - Franker/Letter Opener/Bomb Scanner.	03/07/2009
C381-09 - Mobile simms for MWM tough books.	03/07/2009
C382-09 - Toughbooks - Procurement & Warranty.	03/07/2009
C383-09 - Telephone hardware & service/maintenance	03/07/2009
C340-08 - Sludge Management Services Contract	17/08/2009
C336-09 - Fuel Card Services (OGC)	23/08/2009
C361-09 - Lifting Chains and Davit Sockets Installation Programme	01/09/2009
C411 - Apponitment of Energy Consultant	16/09/2009
C355-09 - Leakage Management Software	18/09/2009
C366-09 - Preparation of IPPC applications for NIW Wastewater Sludge Thickening Centres (Phase 2)	21/09/2009
C390-09 - Financial Risk Assessment	28/09/2009
C287-09 - Provision of NIW Reporter	08/10/2009
C385-09 - Executive Recruitment	08/10/2009
C319-08 - Telemetry System Upgrade Project	14/10/2009
C396-09 - PC10 Project Manager	01/11/2009
C322-08 - Real Time Enterprise System Project	02/11/2009
C393-09 - Cost Reduction Plan for the NIW Fleet	04/11/2009
C384-09 - Supply & Delivery of Cryptosporidium sampling equipment	06/11/2009
C338-09 - Mechanical Joints and Fittings, Plumbing Materials, Under Pressure Fittings	11/11/2009
C339-08 - Concrete & Road Surfacing Supplies (Minor Works)	11/11/2009
C402 - Out Placements	19/11/2009
C388-09 - Provision of sewer baiting	01/12/2009
C397-09 - Printing & Addressing of Interruption of Supply Cards – Quotation	15/12/2009
C406 - Procurement of FITA-MAX Express Elution System	18/12/2009
C337-08 - S&D of PPE, Work-wear, Janitorial Supplies and Tools	01/01/2010
C400 - Supply & Delivery of Twin Steer Tractor Unit	01/01/2010
C401 - Supply & Delivery of 30000 litre semi trailer Vacuum Tank	01/01/2010
C407 - Supply of electricity at sites with unmetered supply points at sites within NIW	01/02/2010

II) CAPITAL WORKS

			Approved Date
JB461	111	Lough Fea Zone Watermain Improvements	02/04/2007
JB508	111	Cargan Zone Watermain Improvements	02/04/2007
KP374	111	Teemore SPS pumps and pumping main replacement	04/04/2007
KG116	111	Aghalee/Aghagllon Screens	04/04/2007
KV119	111	Quarter Road Camlough Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	16/04/2007
JC295	111	Altnahinch Zone Watermain Improvements	16/04/2007
KN568	111	Donagheday Rd, Strabane	16/04/2007
JL736	112	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	20/04/2007
KF065	112	Trotters Walk to Madden Road, Tandragee Sewer Upgrade	20/04/2007
KG115	111	Rose gardens Laurelvale Proposed Foul Sewer	20/04/2007
JC362	111	Ballywillin Road, Portrush, Replacement Watermain	23/04/2007
JA249	111	Craigstown Road, Randalstown, Watermain Extension	23/04/2007
JN477	111	Culvacullion Road, Watermain Extension	03/05/2007
JB629	111	Bancran Road, Draperstown, Watermain Extension	03/05/2007
JL738	111	Coolagh Road, Greysteel - Replacement Watermain	03/05/2007
KG124	111	Old Newry Road, Banbridge Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	03/05/2007
KF068	111	Drummanmore Road, Armagh Storm Sewer	21/05/2007
KV013	112	Rostrevor Sewerage Scheme	21/05/2007
JR402	111	Hydepark Service Reservoir Integrity	21/05/2007
ZZ999	216	Deleted Contracts	21/05/2007
KV106	111	Ballymoyer Road Whitecross Storm Sewer Extension and Foul Sewer Upgrade	21/05/2007
JV115	111	Lurgan Road / Ballygowan Road Alignment	22/05/2007
KF081	111	Killyman Foul Sewer Extension	23/05/2007
JN476	111	Inisclan Pumping Main Extension	31/05/2007
JN478	111	Meenacloy Road.Watermain Extension	31/05/2007
JP648	111	Derryclawan,Lisbellaw.Watermain Extension.	31/05/2007
JN472	151	Backglen Road, Omagh Booster Station	31/05/2007
JB547	213	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area Phase 1	31/05/2007
JB547	511	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area Phase 1	31/05/2007
KV095	111	Upper Dromore Rd, Warrenpoint, Storm Sewer Extension	08/06/2007

			Approved Date
JL743	111	Removal of Stradreagh Spring Source	08/06/2007
KV115	111	The Meadows Newry Trunk Relief Sewer	08/06/2007
KG126	111	Gobrana Road Glenavy Storm Sewer Extension	08/06/2007
JG062	111	Lisnisky Lane/Portadown Road, Portadown	19/06/2007
KG143	111	Silverwood Golf Course Replacement Sewer	19/06/2007
KG132	111	Bleary Road, Bleary Storm and Foul Sewer Ext	19/06/2007
KB388	111	Gortgole Road Portglenone Storm Sewer Outfall	22/06/2007
JC319	111	Beechfield Drive, Coleraine Water Pumping Station	22/06/2007
KF014	111	Clare Village Sewerage Scheme	22/06/2007
JC363	111	Barnside Road, Garvagh, Watermain Extension	22/06/2007
KN583	111	Beragh Foul & Storm Sewer	22/06/2007
JC364	111	Ballinlea Road, Stranocum, Replacement Watermain	22/06/2007
JR404	111	Belfast City Centre Public Realm Phase 1, Area 1	22/06/2007
JA250	111	Kilbride Road/Bryantang Road, Doagh, Watermain Extension	06/07/2007
JB547	215	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area Phase 1	06/07/2007
KV031	111	Hilltown WwTW	19/07/2007
KA158	111	Milltown, Antrim Wastewater Treatment Works	19/07/2007
JF569	111	Ballygawley/CabraghSR Link Main	19/07/2007
JB634	111	Battery	24/07/2007
JG066	111	Manse Road, Ballyward Watermain Extension	24/07/2007
JS253	111	Shore Road, Millisle Sewer & Watermain Replacement	24/07/2007
JS254	111	Moss Road, Millisle Sewer & Watermain Replacement	24/07/2007
JL736	711	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	24/07/2007
JL736	311	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	24/07/2007
JL736	811	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	24/07/2007
JN479	111	Tirwinney.Watermain Extension	30/07/2007
KB364	111	Ballymena Sewage Pumping Station Replacement, Tullygarley	31/07/2007
JL744	111	Old Eglisk Road, Dungannon, Watermain Extension	01/08/2007
KV128	111	Sheetrim Road Cullyhanna Foul Sewer Extension	08/08/2007
KT130	111	Mill Turn Dromore Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	08/08/2007
JN389	111	Rezoning of Lenamore Springs Supply Area	14/08/2007
KV063	112	Newry Sewerage Networks Improvements	17/08/2007
KR323	111	Ligoniel Sewerage Scheme	17/08/2007

			Approved Date
KV072	111	Rooneys Meadow Foul Sewer to Replace Sewage Pumping Station	24/08/2007
KG085	111	Clonmakate Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	24/08/2007
KT128	111	Thornleigh Park, Lisburn Foul & Storm Sewer Upgrade	24/08/2007
KS357	111	Sketrick Island, Whiterock Sewerage Facilities	24/08/2007
KL417	111	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Victoria Market Pumping Station and Fahan Street Relief Sewer	24/08/2007
JF577	111	Ballyloughan Road, Hamiltonsbawn, Armagh Watermain Extension	24/08/2007
JF576	111	Lisbeg Road Watermain Ext (2007)	24/08/2007
JA238	111	Antrim Ring Main Relocation	30/08/2007
JA238	112	Antrim Ring Main Relocation	31/08/2007
JL736	411	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	31/08/2007
KG131	111	Lurgan Road, Aghalee Storm Sewer Extension	04/09/2007
KS309	111	Raholp Wastewater Treatment Works	04/09/2007
JV818	111	Carrick Road Warrenpoint Watermain Extension	04/09/2007
JS276	111	Kilmegan Road, Dundrum, Watermain	04/09/2007
JG069	111	Limekiln Lane, Aghalee Watermain Extension	04/09/2007
JV123	111	Ashtree Hill Drumbanagher Watermain Extension	04/09/2007
KN586	111	Killen Wastewater Treatment Works	06/09/2007
KL419	111	Londonderry Sewer Imps Stage 1 - Strathfoyle Siphon Storage Tank	06/09/2007
KR313	112	Lisbarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	07/09/2007
KR338	111	360-368 Doagh Road, Newtownabbey Sewer Extension	11/09/2007
KR341	111	Demesne Road Holywood Foul & Storm Sewer	11/09/2007
KC330	111	Ballylagan Road, Islandmore	11/09/2007
JR377	111	Hightown Road, Newtownabbey Watermain.	11/09/2007
JA251	111	Crosshill Service Reservoir Water Booster Station, Larne	11/09/2007
KF077	111	Poyntzpass Wastewater Treatment Works Inlet Sewer Replacement	14/09/2007
KV069	111	Carrickmacstay SPS Upgrade/Replacement	14/09/2007
KA170	111	Coastguard Road Larne	25/09/2007
KF066	111	Rear of 25 Main Street, Storm Sewer Extension	25/09/2007
KN605	111	Loughmacrory Storm Sewer Extension.	25/09/2007
KF083	111	Johnston Lodge, Hamiltonsbawn Fowl Sewer ext	25/09/2007

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KN584	111	Gortin Road Omagh Storm Sewer	25/09/2007
KG147	111	Carbet Road Portadown Storm Sewer	26/09/2007
ZZ999	217	Deleted Contracts	26/09/2007
JL736	611	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	26/09/2007
KP299	111	Enniskillen Wastewater Treatment Works	26/09/2007
KV097	111	Belleeks Wastewater Treatment Works	28/09/2007
KL314	114	Limavady Wastewater Treatment Works	01/10/2007
JL736	911	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	03/10/2007
KV058	111	Castlewellan Forest Park Sewage Pumping Station	03/10/2007
KP587	111	Lisnagole Road Lisnaskea Foul Sewer Extension	03/10/2007
KV141	111	Limekiln Road Newry Foul Sewer Extension	05/10/2007
KN607	111	Creagmore Road, Drumquin Foul Sewer Extension	05/10/2007
JF574	111	Carland Bridge (Cookstown Rd) Road Realignment	05/10/2007
KV042	111	Cullaville Wastewater Treatment Works	08/10/2007
JR302	111	Purdysburn East Zone Watermain Improvements	16/10/2007
JR304	111	Castlereagh Zone Watermain Improvements	16/10/2007
KF062	111	Cavanacaw Road, Storm Sewer	16/10/2007
KC395	111	St Patricks Avenue, Coleraine - Sewer Repair.	16/10/2007
KF078	111	Dungormley	16/10/2007
KV144	111	Dromore Street Rathfriland Storm Sewer Extension	16/10/2007
JS220	112	Bangor Outer Zone Watermain Improvements	18/10/2007
KV033	111	Warrenpoint Wastewater Treatment Works	19/10/2007
KG127	111	Madden Road Tandragee Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	19/10/2007
KV116	111	Abbey Park Kilkeel Sewer Replacement	19/10/2007
KG149	111	Dunkirk Road Waringstown Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	22/10/2007
JP649	111	Deerpark Lane watermain extension	24/10/2007
KR392	111	Burren Way, Cregagh	24/10/2007
JB547	218	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area Phase 1	24/10/2007
JB547	219	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area Phase 1	24/10/2007
JB547	112	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area Phase 1	24/10/2007
KS215	112	Annalong Wastewater Treatment Works	29/10/2007
KP366	111	Kinoughtra, Teemore Storm Sewer Extension	30/10/2007
KC323	111	Finvoy Road Ballymoney Sewerage Scheme	30/10/2007

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KR357	111	Loughview Terrace Greenisland Storm Sewer	30/10/2007
JL736	113	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1	30/10/2007
KR323	112	Ligoniel Sewerage Scheme	30/10/2007
KR382	111	Salinity Removal from Sewerage System discharging to new North Down Wastewater Treatment Works	30/10/2007
KC355	111	Bravallan Road Ballymoney Storm Sewer	30/10/2007
KA202	111	The Woods, Old Glenarm Road, Larne, Storm Sewer Outfall	30/10/2007
JN482	111	Killymore Road, Gortin Pumping Station	31/10/2007
KF048	111	Moor Gardens Sewer Upgrades	31/10/2007
KR346	111	Ivanhoe Avenue Belfast Storm and Foul Sewer Replacement	05/11/2007
KV108	111	School Road, Newtownhamilton Storm Sewer Wxtension	05/11/2007
KG134	211	Carrick Drive, Banbridge Road Lurgan Storm Sewer Extension	08/11/2007
KS376	111	Newcastle Sewer Networks Improvements	08/11/2007
KS381	111	North Road, Newtownards Storm	08/11/2007
KS377	112	Downs Road/Castle Park Sewer Upgrade/ Attenuation	13/11/2007
KA199	111	Antrim Rd, Aldergrove - Trunk Sewer Replacement	13/11/2007
KL414	111	Drumahoe Sewerage Scheme Sewage Pumping Station	13/11/2007
KR343	111	O'Neill Road, Glengormley Storm Sewer Extension	19/11/2007
KN571	111	Derry Road Storm Sewer	19/11/2007
KS212	111	Portaferry Wastewater Treatment Works	19/11/2007
JL693	114	Cityside Zone Watermain Improvements	21/11/2007
JL693	115	Cityside Zone Watermain Improvements	21/11/2007
KA188	111	Steeple Road Antrim - Replacement Sewer	27/11/2007
KC352	111	Castleroe Road Coleraine Foul Sewer Extension	27/11/2007
KG148	111	Mark Street Lurgan Storm Sewer Extension	29/11/2007
JC368	111	Lisheegan Road, Rasharkin	06/12/2007
JL749	111	Letterlougher Road Claudy First Time Services Extension	06/12/2007
KR395	111	Cloghan Park, Belfast Flood Alleviation	06/12/2007
KF031	111	Cabragh Wastewater Treatment Works	06/12/2007
KA184	111	Ballyeaston Road Ballyclare Storm Sewer	13/12/2007
JB643	111	Creagh Hill, Castledawson, Watermain Extension	13/12/2007

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KV117	111	Spring Meadows/Riverfields Warrenpoint Foul Sewer Extension	13/12/2007
KG159	111	Waringstown Wastewater Treatment Works Storm Tanks	18/12/2007
KG059	111	Old Lurgan Road Sewer Extensions	18/12/2007
KF029	111	Bush Wastewater Treatment Works	18/12/2007
KV009	111	Gilford Wastewater Treatment Works	18/12/2007
KB354	112	Orritor Road, Cookstown - Sewer Replacement.Phase 2	18/12/2007
KS362	111	Station Road, Crossgar Replacement Sewer	20/12/2007
KT144	111	The Square, Hillsborough Storm Sewer Extension.	20/12/2007
KP351	111	Derrylin Wastewater Treatment Works	03/01/2008
JL693	116	Cityside Zone Watermain Improvements	08/01/2008
KR393	111	Re-direction of Effluents from Belfast Sludge Incinerator within Belfast Wastewater Treatment Works	08/01/2008
JB644	111	Bank Square, Maghera	08/01/2008
JC365	111	Bushtown Road, Coleraine, Watermain Extension	08/01/2008
JA255	111	Glenavy Road, Crumlin, Replacement Watermain	08/01/2008
JB637	111	Dunmore Lane, Cookstown, Watermain Extension	08/01/2008
KA200	111	Ballycorr Road, Ballyclare, Storm Outfall	10/01/2008
KS809	111	Carrowdore Sewer Replacement	10/01/2008
JF007	111	Seagahan Zone Watermain Improvements	14/01/2008
KG137	111	Main Street Glenavy Storm Sewer Extension	14/01/2008
JC352	111	Loughguile Zone Watermain Improvements	16/01/2008
JC353	111	Rasharkin Zone Watermain Improvements	16/01/2008
JC349	111	Portballintrae Zone Watermain Improvements	16/01/2008
JC351	111	Ballynahone Zone Watermain Improvements	16/01/2008
JC294	111	Ballinrees West Zone Watermain Improvements	16/01/2008
KT098	112	Annahilt Wastewater Treatment Works	16/01/2008
JS220	111	Bangor Outer Zone Watermain Improvements	16/01/2008
JB517	111	Cookstown Zone Watermain Improvements	16/01/2008
JP610	111	Meenacloyabane Service Reservoir	23/01/2008
KF027	111	Benburb/Milltown - RBC Installations West & South	23/01/2008
KB280	111	Draperstown Wastewater Treatment Works	28/01/2008
KG120	111	Foul Sewer Extension, Garveys Road, Dorsey	28/01/2008
KL416	111	Park Wastewater Treatment Works	28/01/2008
JR367	111	Service Reservoir Enhanced Security	29/01/2008

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KF030	111	Killyman Wastewater Treatment Works	01/02/2008
JN368	111	Derg - Omagh Area Transfer Pumps	01/02/2008
KG108	111	Lough Road, Lurgan Storm Sewer Extension	07/02/2008
KL423	111	Crevagh Park Sewage Pumping Station Abandonment	07/02/2008
KL418	111	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Gransha Pumping Station	07/02/2008
JC369	111	Newbridge Road, Ballymoney, Replacement Watermain	07/02/2008
KN592	111	Crevanagh Road, Omagh, Foul Sewer Pumping Main Extension	08/02/2008
JV023	111	Fofanny/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	08/02/2008
KV079	111	McShanes Road, Bessbrook Foul Sewer Extension	13/02/2008
JV067	152	Jerrettspass Chlorination	13/02/2008
JV067	151	Jerrettspass Chlorination	13/02/2008
JA252	111	Castle Road, Antrim, Watermain	13/02/2008
KS806	111	Movilla Road, Newtownards Foul Sewer Extension	14/02/2008
KG153	112	Gilford Road Portadown Sewerage Upgrades	15/02/2008
KN579	111	Luganboy Road, Castlederg Foul and Storm Extensions	18/02/2008
KS263	111	Saintfield Wastewater Treatment Works	21/02/2008
KX126	111	Glencam Road, Omagh Storm Sewer	21/02/2008
KX089	111	Strabane Road, Castlederg Storm Sewer	21/02/2008
JV820	111	Carron Hill Supply Zone Management Plan	21/02/2008
JL751	111	Brishey Springs Decommissioning, Dungiven	21/02/2008
JL752	111	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	21/02/2008
JL752	112	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	21/02/2008
KF076	111	Gorestown Road Sewerage Scheme	21/02/2008
KP373	111	Galliagh Park Enniskillen Replacement Sewers	21/02/2008
KC347	111	Froccess Road Ballymoney Foul Sewer	21/02/2008
KC336	111	Glen Road, Garvagh Foul Sewer	25/02/2008
KF026	112	Hamiltonsbawn Wastewater Treatment Works	26/02/2008
KS206	112	Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works	27/02/2008
JS224	111	Lough Cowey Zone Watermain Improvements	27/02/2008
KG160	111	Meadow Lane Portadown Sewer Realignment	27/02/2008
JL752	212	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	28/02/2008
KT143	111	Poundburn Wastewater Treatment Works	28/02/2008
KC354	111	Priestland Rd, Bushmills St Sewer Extension	28/02/2008

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KT098	111	Annahilt Wastewater Treatment Works	28/02/2008
KA190	111	Newlodge Road Antrim - Foul Sewer Extension	28/02/2008
KR333	111	Newtownbreda, Dunmurry, New Holland Wastewater Treatment Works - Nutrient Removal	29/02/2008
KR333	112	Newtownbreda, Dunmurry, New Holland Wastewater Treatment Works - Nutrient Removal	29/02/2008
KR333	113	Newtownbreda, Dunmurry, New Holland Wastewater Treatment Works - Nutrient Removal	29/02/2008
KT124	111	Dromara Wastewater Treatment Works	29/02/2008
KR390	111	Cloughy Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	29/02/2008
KR388	111	Ballywalter Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	29/02/2008
KF069	111	Coash Road, Dungannon Storm Sewer Extension	03/03/2008
KR313	111	Lisbarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	05/03/2008
KC218	212	Portrush Sewer Improvements Stage 4	05/03/2008
KT373	111	Hulls Lane, Lisburn Foul Sewer Extension	05/03/2008
KC231	111	Ballycastle Sewerage Scheme	07/03/2008
KB376	111	Straw Village Sewer Upgrades	07/03/2008
KX935	111	Mantlin Road, Kesh Sewerage Scheme	10/03/2008
KG003	112	Magheralin Sewerage Scheme	10/03/2008
KS384	111	Darragh Cross Wastewater Treatment Works	10/03/2008
JB647	214	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	10/03/2008
KB353	113	Maghera Area Sewers	12/03/2008
KB353	114	Maghera Area Sewers	12/03/2008
JS112	151	North Down Strategic Trunk Watermains	13/03/2008
KS224	111	Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works	13/03/2008
JB647	215	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	13/03/2008
JC351	112	Ballynahone Zone Watermain Improvements	13/03/2008
KR342	112	Belfast Lough North Shore Wastewater Treatment Works	14/03/2008
JP653	111	Enniskillen New Hospital Watermain Extension	18/03/2008
KR389	111	Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	21/03/2008
KR387	111	Ballywhiskin Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	21/03/2008
KX127	111	Moorlough Road, Artigarvan Foul Sewer	21/03/2008
KX140	111	Farmhill Road, Ballymagrory Foul Sewer	21/03/2008

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KT140	111	Hugenot drive Lisburn Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	21/03/2008
KB374	111	Tullywiggan Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	26/03/2008
KC313	111	Rasharkin Flood Alleviation and Sewer Extension	27/03/2008
KR406	111	Carrowdore Wastewater Treatment Works I	27/03/2008
KR406	151	Carrowdore Wastewater Treatment Works I	27/03/2008
JN428	111	Derg West Zone Watermain Improvements	27/03/2008
KB317	211	EPF Flood Alleviation Project	28/03/2008
KB285	111	Sandhole Wastewater Treatment Works .	28/03/2008
KL410	111	Ballycoleman, Strabane Flood Alleviation Scheme	28/03/2008
KA153	111	Castledawson Sewerage Rationalisation	31/03/2008
KA153	112	Castledawson Sewerage Rationalisation	31/03/2008
KS815	111	Waste Water Pumping Stations Screens Removal and Pumps Replacement, Ards/Down.	02/04/2008
JB647	213	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	03/04/2008
JL752	214	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	03/04/2008
JL752	211	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	03/04/2008
JS219	111	North Down,Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	03/04/2008
JR304	112	Castlereagh Zone Watermain Improvements	03/04/2008
KB343	111	Moneymore Wastewater Treatment Works inlet improvements	03/04/2008
JF007	112	Seagahan Zone Watermain Improvements	03/04/2008
JG018	111	Castor Bay/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	03/04/2008
JG019	111	Castor Bay/Craigavon North Watermain Rehabilitation	03/04/2008
JG021	111	Castor Bay/Craigavon South Zone Watermain Rehabilitation	03/04/2008
JR367	151	Service Reservoir Enhanced Security	03/04/2008
KC294	111	Ballymoney Sewerage Improvements	04/04/2008
JT126	111	Lisburn North Rural Zone Watermain Improvements	21/04/2008
JB501	111	Casheltown Zone Watermain Improvements	21/04/2008
JD207	111	Tullagh Road, Cookstown	21/04/2008
JF006	111	Altmore/Gortlenaghan Zone Watermain Improvements	21/04/2008
JB647	212	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	21/04/2008
JR408	111	Belfast City Centre public Realm Phase 1, Area 3	21/04/2008
KT375	111	Prince William Road, Lisburn Foul Sewer Extension	24/04/2008

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JR406	111	Knockagh Road, Woodburn, Carrickfergus Replacement Watermain	28/04/2008
JL752	213	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	29/04/2008
JL747	111	Repair of GAC Filters at Carmoney Water Treatment Works	01/05/2008
KL419	112	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Strathfoyle Siphon Storage Tank L'Derry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Strathfoyle Siphon Storage Tank	01/05/2008
KC315	112	Ballymoney/Coleraine Sewers	01/05/2008
KG036	111	EPF Flood Alleviation -Obins St	01/05/2008
KB412	111	Cookstown Road Money more Foul Sewer Extension	15/05/2008
KR386	111	St Meryl Park / Kennedy Way Sewer Upgrade	15/05/2008
KL430	111	Gortnahey Road, Gortnahey, Dungiven Foul Sewer Extension	15/05/2008
JC372	111	Newbridge Road, Ballymoney, Watermain Extension	15/05/2008
JF579	112	Dungannon to Ballygawley (A4) Dualling Watermain Diversions	15/05/2008
JB647	217	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	15/05/2008
JB647	218	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	15/05/2008
JB647	216	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	28/05/2008
JN493	111	Georgian Villas, Omagh Replacement Watermain	28/05/2008
JN494	111	Rodgers Road, Tattykeel Watermain Extension	28/05/2008
JL752	311	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	28/05/2008
KG057	111	Kiln Road, Lurgan Foul Sewer Extension	28/05/2008
JF563	111	Seagahan Water Treatment Works	28/05/2008
JB583	111	Oak Park, Draperstown Replacement. Watermain.	28/05/2008
KS354	111	Bangor Academy Sewers, Castle Street	28/05/2008
KS224	112	Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works	30/05/2008
KC324	111	Anticur Rd/Carrowadoon Road, Dunloy Sewerage Scheme	05/06/2008
KB431	111	The Brambles, Magherafelt – Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	05/06/2008
KS804	111	Millisle Drainage Area Plan - Phase 1	05/06/2008
KB362	111	Chapel Street, Cookstown	06/06/2008
KO173	111	Ballynakilly Sewage Pumping Station	06/06/2008
KO170	111	Lough Road, Lurgan	09/06/2008
JB647	211	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	11/06/2008

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KS811	111	Portaferry Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	12/06/2008
JA261	111	Old Ballybracken Road Barnish Road Kells Replacement Watermain	16/06/2008
KL427	111	Ballykelly Main St, Replacement Sewer	16/06/2008
JN480	111	Dunnamona Road, Omagh. Replacement Watermain.	16/06/2008
JN481	111	Cornavarrow, Omagh. Replacement Watermain	16/06/2008
KG134	111	Carrick Drive, Banbridge Road Lurgan Storm Sewer Extension	16/06/2008
KC308	111	Mussenden Road Articlave	23/06/2008
KB411	111	Milburn Storm Sewer	23/06/2008
KF312	111	Ashley Gardens Armagh foul sewer replacement	24/06/2008
JN484	111	Glenhordial WTW replacement of Camowen pumping main	24/06/2008
JB647	219	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	24/06/2008
JB647	311	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	24/06/2008
JR414	111	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	24/06/2008
KA206	111	Small Wastewater Treatment Works Priority Upgrades	01/07/2008
KR377	111	Glendarragh SPS - Replacement pumping main	01/07/2008
KL429	111	Assessment of Flow Monitoring in Wastewater Treatment Works	01/07/2008
KF313	111	Lisanally Special School, Armagh Foul Sewer Replacement	07/07/2008
KG146	111	Cloncarrish Road Birches Storm Sewer Extension	07/07/2008
KV113	111	Skerriff Road Cullyhanna Foul Sewer Extension	07/07/2008
KT384	111	Mandeville Avenue, Lisburn Foul Sewer Extension	07/07/2008
KP588	111	ST Patricks Terrace, Lisnaskea Flood Alleviation Scheme	07/07/2008
KC396	111	Mussenden Road, Articlave, Storm Sewer Extension	07/07/2008
JR414	113	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	07/07/2008
JB650	111	Drummuck Road Maghera Watermain Extension	07/07/2008
JB651	111	Carnlough Road, Broughshane, Watermain Replacement	07/07/2008
KV012	111	Crossmaglen Wastewater Treatment Works	09/07/2008
KL406	111	Wastewater Treatment Works Quick Wins 2005	09/07/2008
KG163	111	Obins Street Portadown Storm Sewer Extension	22/07/2008
JR414	112	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	22/07/2008
KS816	111	Magheraknock Road, Ballynahinch Sewer Replacement	01/08/2008

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KV093	111	Millstone Close, Moneyslane Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	01/08/2008
KF033	111	Castlecaulfield Wastewater Treatment Works	04/08/2008
KD041	111	Moyle Rd Ballycastle	15/08/2008
KA168	111	Milltown Road Antrim	15/08/2008
KL437	111	Queens Quay combined sewer diversion Londonderry	15/08/2008
KR396	111	Kylemore Park, Belfast Flood Alleviation	15/08/2008
KL435	111	Killary Road Drainage Improvements	18/08/2008
KV122	111	High Street, Gilford Sewer Replacement	18/08/2008
JC376	111	Tullysaran Road Watermain Extension	18/08/2008
KS386	111	Longisland Drive Sewage Pumping Station Rising Main (Kircubbin)	18/08/2008
JS268	112	Newtownards Southern Relief Road	18/08/2008
KA191	112	Black Cave & Upper Roddens Sewage Improvements, Larne	18/08/2008
JT149	114	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	18/08/2008
JS222	111	Newtownards Town Zone Watermain Improvements	18/08/2008
JN355	111	North Tyrone Zone Watermain Improvements	18/08/2008
JS280	111	Ballycreelly Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Rep	18/08/2008
JS281	111	Fields at Ballycreelly Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Rep	18/08/2008
KC318	111	Portstewart Area Sewers	19/08/2008
JL752	215	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	19/08/2008
KG101	111	Martins Yard and Gilford Mill Sewage Pumping Station Rationalisation	22/08/2008
JB647	111	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	27/08/2008
KT134	111	Lower Ballinderry Wastewater Treatment Works	03/09/2008
KB397	111	Old Portglenone Road Ahoghill, Foul Sewer Extension	04/09/2008
KC407	111	Middlepark Road, Cushendall, Relief Sewer	04/09/2008
JS278	111	Saintfield Road, Ballygowan, Replacement Watermain	04/09/2008
JC375	111	Carnamoney Lane, Draperstown, Watermain Extension	04/09/2008
JR414	118	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	05/09/2008
KR418	111	Castle Place / High Street Sewer and Water main Upgrade	05/09/2008
JP656	111	Croaghmr Rd, Enniskillen Replacement Watermain	10/09/2008
KG063	111	Heron Wood and & Jubilee Heights, Dromore Sewage Pumping Stations	10/09/2008

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KG069	111	Stranmore Road Gilford Sewerage Scheme	15/09/2008
KV149	111	Newry Wastewater Treatment Works Aeration upgrade	15/09/2008
JA260	111	Clonkeen, Randalstown, Replacement Watermain	15/09/2008
JR401	111	Lower Chichester Street, Belfast Watermains Replacement, Belfast Public Realm	15/09/2008
KS378	111	Burren River Sewage Pumping Station Upgrades & Networks Improvements	17/09/2008
KG153	111	Gilford Road Portadown Sewerage Upgrades	18/09/2008
KS369	111	Ballylough Road/Aghliscnafin Road Castlewellan	22/09/2008
JN489	111	Camowen River/Killyclogher Road Watermain Replacement	24/09/2008
JL752	113	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	07/10/2008
KR404	111	Dunmurray Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	14/10/2008
KR399	111	Ballyholme (Bangor) Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	14/10/2008
KV063	113	Newry Sewerage Networks Improvements	14/10/2008
KD957	111	Dunnamore Sewerage Scheme	14/10/2008
KD074	111	Relief Sewer, Finvoy Road, Ballymoney	14/10/2008
JB660	111	Lough Fea Road, Cookstown, Watermain Replacement.	17/10/2008
JR414	119	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	17/10/2008
JA263	111	Aghnadarragh Road, Glenavy Watermain Extension	17/10/2008
KD089	111	Rashee Rd Ballyclare Storm sewer	17/10/2008
KD090	111	Killygonlan/Mullanahoe Foul Sewer Replacement	17/10/2008
JR414	114	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	17/10/2008
JR414	115	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	17/10/2008
KR375	111	216-228 Belmont Road, Belfast Sewer Rehabilitation	17/10/2008
KC353	111	Knock Road Ballymoney Foul & Storm Sewer Extension	20/10/2008
KB400	111	Mullanahoe Road Ardboe Foul Sewer	20/10/2008
JB624	111	Ballymacombs Road	20/10/2008
KA179	111	Belfast Road Antrim Storm Sewer	20/10/2008
KG078	111	Dromore Rd, Lurgan, Sewer Extension	20/10/2008
KC328	111	Castlecatt Road, Dervock	20/10/2008
KA161	112	Creevery Sewerage Scheme Phase II	20/10/2008
KG118	111	Crumlin Road Storm Sewer Extension	22/10/2008
JA254	111	Birchill Road Antrim Watermain	30/10/2008
KF315	111	Bracken Court Coalisland Storm Sewer Extension	30/10/2008

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KS310	111	Clough Wastewater Treatment Works	30/10/2008
KA143	113	Aldergrove Sewerage Scheme	03/11/2008
KD705	111	Main Street Storm Sewer, Coagh	03/11/2008
KC394	111	Mounthamilton Sewage Pumping Station, Cloughmills Replacement	03/11/2008
KV145	111	Charlotte Street/Newry Road Warrenpoint Proposed Sewer Improvements	06/11/2008
KG112	111	Dunkirk Road to Main Street Waringstown SS	06/11/2008
KR385	111	Ormeau Road Storm Separation	12/11/2008
JR414	214	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	20/11/2008
KL421	111	Gortinure Road, Gortinwood, Storm and Foul Sewer Extension	21/11/2008
JB623	111	Northern Key Transport Corridor, Ballymena Watermain Scheme	21/11/2008
KN612	111	Strathroy, Omagh Storm Sewer	21/11/2008
KV067	111	Harmony Heights, Newry Foul Sewer Extension	21/11/2008
KS273	111	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	26/11/2008
KV070	111	Springfield Road Warrenpoint Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	26/11/2008
KS206	113	Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works	26/11/2008
KS206	114	Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works	26/11/2008
KN556	111	Mountfield Wastewater Treatment Works	26/11/2008
JL747	112	Repair of GAC Filters at Carmoney Water Treatment Works	26/11/2008
KP591	111	New foul sewer for H/D at Caledon Rd, Aughnacloy	26/11/2008
KB440	111	Broughshane Road, Ballymena, Foul Sewer Extension	27/11/2008
KB439	111	Kilmascally Road, Ardboe, Storm Sewer	27/11/2008
KB422	111	Killyfaddy Road Magherafelt Sewerage Scheme	27/11/2008
KC231	112	Ballycastle Sewerage Scheme	27/11/2008
KC309	111	Coleraine Rd, Portstewart SS	01/12/2008
KC315	111	Ballymoney/Coleraine Sewers	01/12/2008
KC327	111	Bridge Road, Dunloy	01/12/2008
KV146	111	Dunaval SPS Storm Tanks	17/12/2008
JS279	111	Ballygowan Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Replacement	17/12/2008
KL452	111	Campsie Sewage Pumping Station Emergency O/F Redirection.	17/12/2008

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JB655	111	Mullaghboy Road, Bellaghy, Watermain Replacement	23/12/2008
JR414	215	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	23/12/2008
JR414	216	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	23/12/2008
JB636	111	Old Ballymoney Road, Ballymena, Replacement Watermain	23/12/2008
KL423	112	Crevagh Park Sewage Pumping Station Abandonment	23/12/2008
JL693	117	Cityside Zone Watermain Improvements	23/12/2008
JG022	111	Castor Bay/ Shanmoy Zone	23/12/2008
JB645	111	Tullygarley Road, Ballymena, Watermain Scheme	02/01/2009
JC374	111	Gortahar Road, Rasharkin Watermain Extension	02/01/2009
JC373	111	Lisboy Road Dunloy Watermain Extension	02/01/2009
JR414	116	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	08/01/2009
JC349	112	Portballintrae Zone Watermain Improvements	08/01/2009
JL699	111	Limavady Zone Watermain Improvements	08/01/2009
KB321	111	Knockloughrim Wastewater Treatment Works Outfall	08/01/2009
JC382	111	Ballynarry Road, Derrykeighan, Watermain Extension	13/01/2009
KL439	111	Cregg Sewage Pumping Station, Claudy Emergency Overflow	16/01/2009
JV828	111	Shot Lane / Fedney Hill Road Banbridge Watermains Upgrade	26/01/2009
KB444	111	Burn Road Cookstown Storm Sewer Extension	26/01/2009
KD039	112	Victoria Rd, Ballyclare	26/01/2009
KD106	111	Tamnymullan Lane, Maghera	26/01/2009
KF005	111	Coalisland Wastewater Treatment Works	26/01/2009
JG036	112	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	26/01/2009
KV074	111	Cambrook Sewage Pumping Station to Green Road	26/01/2009
KR403	112	Whitehouse Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	02/02/2009
KC351	111	Station Road Dervock Foul Sewer	03/02/2009
JC370	111	Windyhill Road/ Ballystrone Road, Coleraine, Watermain Extension	10/02/2009
JR414	217	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	10/02/2009
KC405	111	McClelland Park Dunloy Flood Alleviation DG5	11/02/2009
JC336	111	Altnahinch and Seagahan WTW's Residual Sludge Disposal	11/02/2009
KB425	111	Caherty Road, Broughshane	11/02/2009
KG083	111	Churchill Park Sewage Pumping Station upgrade	11/02/2009

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KB387	111	Church Street, Cookstown	11/02/2009
KG082	111	Foxgrove/Roughal Lane Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	17/02/2009
KC299	111	Bushmills + Portballintrae Wastewater Treatment Works	17/02/2009
KN157	111	Cranagh Wastewater Treatment Works	17/02/2009
KC288	111	Ballybogey Wastewater Treatment Works	17/02/2009
KB437	111	Whitewater Bridge Straw Foul Sewer Extension	17/02/2009
JB652	111	Frys Road, Ballymena New Watermain	17/02/2009
JB653	111	Loan Command SR, Inlet Watermain	17/02/2009
JB664	111	Munie Road/Straidkilly Road, Glenarm, Watermain Replacement	17/02/2009
KV155	111	Rostrevor Sewers Upgrading - Horners Lane Improvements	02/03/2009
JR424	111	Betterment and Deferment of Renewal for Mains Diversion at QUB Playing Fields	02/03/2009
KG121	111	Upper Edward Street Newry	02/03/2009
JG062	112	Lisnisky Lane/Portadown Road, Portadown	02/03/2009
KC349	111	Church Road Rasharkin Storm Sewer Extension	02/03/2009
KA151	111	Roughfort Wastewater Treatment Works	02/03/2009
KR203	111	Kensington Gardens Flood Relief	02/03/2009
KC337	111	Moneygran Road Kilrea Foul and Storm Sewers	06/03/2009
KV116	113	Abbey Park Kilkeel Sewer Replacement	06/03/2009
KB409	111	Lissan Road Cookstown Replacement Storm Sewer	06/03/2009
KC409	111	Drumavoley Park, Ballycastle Foul Sewer.	06/03/2009
KS817	111	Saintfield Waste Water Pumping Station, Pumping Main Replacement.	09/03/2009
JB638	111	Kildowney Hill, Glarryford, Replacement Watermain	10/03/2009
KC389	111	Mountsandel Road, Coleraine - Sewer Upgrade	10/03/2009
JL758	112	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	10/03/2009
JC383	111	Drumcroon Road, Coleraine, Replacement Watermain	10/03/2009
JL754	111	Derry City Centre Public Realm Replacement Watermains	11/03/2009
KR413	111	Grahamsbridge Road, Dundonald, Belfast Storm Sewer Extension.	11/03/2009
JN482	151	Killymore Road, Gortin Pumping Station	11/03/2009
KD041	112	Moyle Rd Ballycastle	11/03/2009
KT123	111	Edenderry Wastewater Treatment Works	25/03/2009

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KR323	113	Ligoniel Sewerage Scheme	27/03/2009
JT149	115	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	27/03/2009
JT149	116	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	27/03/2009
JT149	117	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	27/03/2009
KR410	111	629 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast Storm Sewer Extension	27/03/2009
KA196	111	Glenarm Sewage Pumping Station	27/03/2009
JA265	111	Enkalon Industrial Park, Randalstown Road, Antrim, Watermain Extension	27/03/2009
KR420	111	Inglewood Park, Bangor Storm Sewer	27/03/2009
KR424	111	Green Walk Newtownabbey Storm Sewer Extension	27/03/2009
KT387	111	Trinity Terrace Lisburn Foul & Storm Sewer Extensions	27/03/2009
JL758	111	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	27/03/2009
KL457	111	Londonderry Drainage Area Plan: Storm Screening	30/03/2009
JL758	113	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	30/03/2009
JT149	111	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	30/03/2009
JT149	112	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	30/03/2009
KL345	111	Donnybrewer Wastewater Treatment Works	30/03/2009
KL345	112	Donnybrewer Wastewater Treatment Works	30/03/2009
KF012	111	Moygashel Wastewater Treatment Works	30/03/2009
KR361	111	Carrowreagh Road Dundonald Storm Sewer	03/04/2009
JB659	111	Old Portglenone Road, Portglenone, Watermain Trunk	03/04/2009
KA207	111	Exchange Avenue, Doagh, Storm Sewer Extension	22/04/2009
KT385	111	Dundrod Drive Lisburn Storm Sewer Upgrade	22/04/2009
JL758	211	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	22/04/2009
JN488	151	Aghyran Road Booster Station	22/04/2009
KR402	112	Joymount Carrick Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	22/04/2009
KS328	111	Delinvilla Lane Dundrum Storm Sewer	08/05/2009
KB425	112	Caherty Road, Broughshane	11/05/2009
KL300	111	Dungiven Wastewater Treatment Works	13/05/2009
KL363	111	Feeny Wastewater Treatment Works	13/05/2009
KB281	111	Maghera Wastewater Treatment Works	13/05/2009
KB279	111	Stewartstown Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	13/05/2009
JD304	111	Festival Pk, Cookstown, Replacement Watermain & Foul Sewer	14/05/2009

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KB430	111	Derrynoyd Road Draperstown Foul & Storm Sewer Extension	14/05/2009
KG156	111	Crumlin Road Lower Ballinderry Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	14/05/2009
JR400	111	A2 Shore Road Re-alignment – Greenisland	14/05/2009
JC350	111	Ballycastle Zone Watermain Improvements	14/05/2009
JL758	119	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	14/05/2009
KR450	111	Fountainville Ave, Belfast, Sewer Collapsed.	14/05/2009
JR429	111	First Time Services Visteon Site.Finaghy Road North,Belfast	14/05/2009
JL758	212	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	14/05/2009
JL758	117	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	14/05/2009
KV152	111	Abbey Grammar School Storm Sewer Extension	18/05/2009
KT374	111	Scroggy Road Glenavy	18/05/2009
JV820	151	Carron Hill Supply Zone Management Plan	18/05/2009
JS223	111	Ballygowan Zone Watermain Improvements	18/05/2009
JS225	111	Mid Down Zone Watermain Improvements	18/05/2009
JL697	111	Waterside Zone Watermain Improvements	18/05/2009
JL698	111	Carmony East Zone Watermain Improvements	18/05/2009
KL300	112	Dungiven Wastewater Treatment Works	27/05/2009
KS366	111	Upper Greenwall Street Storm Sewer Extension	03/06/2009
JT149	118	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	03/06/2009
KD608	111	Sandholes Rd SS Cookstown	03/06/2009
KS344	111	Oaklands, Darragh Cross Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	03/06/2009
KG084	111	Regency Manor Sewage Pumping Station	03/06/2009
JB623	151	Northern Key Transport Corridor, Ballymena Watermain Scheme	03/06/2009
KR411	112	Antrim Road, Mallusk Foul and Storm Sewer Extension	03/06/2009
JL758	213	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	03/06/2009
JL758	214	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	03/06/2009
JR427	111	Mains replacement ,Belfast Public Realm Phase 1 Area 2	03/06/2009
KS828	111	Glen Road, Comber Flood Alleviation	09/06/2009
KR402	111	Joymount Carrick Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	09/06/2009
KS326	111	Commons Road, Ballykinlar Storm Sewer	15/06/2009
JL758	215	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	15/06/2009

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KX220	111	Small Wastewater Treatment Works Priority Upgrades	15/06/2009
KS377	113	Downs Road/Castle Park Sewer Upgrade/ Attenuation	17/06/2009
JG073	112	Lurgan & Portadown Public Realm Associated Infrastructure Improvements	19/06/2009
JG073	111	Lurgan & Portadown Public Realm Associated Infrastructure Improvements	19/06/2009
KC397	111	Castlerock Road Coleraine - Storm Sewer	19/06/2009
KB429	111	Tamneylennan - Stewartstown Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	19/06/2009
KG157	111	Maghaberry Flood Alleviation Projects	19/06/2009
JR423	111	Thornberry Hill, Wolfhill Mains Extension, Ligoneil, Belfast	19/06/2009
JB656	111	Magherafelt Road, Tobermore, Watermain Extension	19/06/2009
KV157	111	Rathfriland WWTW Inlet Screens and CSOS	23/06/2009
JS284	114	Portaferry, Ballyquinton area mains replacement.	23/06/2009
KB284	111	Coagh Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	24/06/2009
KB278	111	Moneymore Sewage Treatment Works Improvements	24/06/2009
KL459	111	Limavady DAP: Stage 2, Roe Mill Road Sewer Upgrades	26/06/2009
KR309	111	Belvoir Park Trunk Sewer	03/07/2009
KR400	111	Lukes Point (Bangor) Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	03/07/2009
KN610	111	Drumlegagh Storm Sewer Extension	10/07/2009
KV158	111	Manse Road Banbridge Foul & Storm Sewer Extensions	10/07/2009
JS284	111	Portaferry, Ballyquinton area mains replacement.	10/07/2009
JS284	112	Portaferry, Ballyquinton area mains replacement.	10/07/2009
JR432	111	Whiteabbey Lower, Mains Replacement. Newtownabbey	10/07/2009
JR432	112	Whiteabbey Lower, Mains Replacement. Newtownabbey	10/07/2009
JC381	111	Altnahinch WTP, Ballymoney, New CWB.	10/07/2009
KG167	111	Ripley Meadows Portadown Storm Sewer Upgrade	10/07/2009
KS827	111	Hamilton Road, Bangor Storm Sewer	21/07/2009
KT386	111	Lisburn Road, Culavey Road Hillsborough Storm Sewer	21/07/2009
KL431	111	Limavady Drainage Area Plan stage 1	21/07/2009
KP590	111	Loaneden, Kesh Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade and PN Extension	21/07/2009
KV092	111	Bannview Heights, Banbridge Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	21/07/2009
KD141	111	Headland Avenue Storm relief sewer	23/07/2009

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KC310	111	Drumcon Sewerage Scheme	23/07/2009
JB665	111	Tullaghans Service Reservoir, Dunloy, New Reservoir	23/07/2009
JC378	111	Glenlough Service Reservoir, Ballymoney, New SR	23/07/2009
JB648	111	Dungonnell Command Service Reservoir	23/07/2009
KR421	111	Hillview Road Belfast Storm Sewer Extension	27/07/2009
JB653	151	Loan Command SR, Inlet Watermain	28/07/2009
KS371	111	Killinchy Street Comber Storm Sewer	28/07/2009
KS381	112	North Road, Newtownards Storm	28/07/2009
KD021	111	Knocktarna Manor, Coleraine Replacement Sewage Pumping Station	31/07/2009
KB352	112	Ballymena Area Sewers	31/07/2009
KC307	112	Portrush Area Sewers	31/07/2009
KC231	113	Ballycastle Sewerage Scheme	31/07/2009
JC293	111	Ballinrees Central Zone Watermain Improvements	31/07/2009
JN495	111	Creggan Road Carrickmore Watermain Extension	31/07/2009
KS820	111	Upper North St/Mark St, Newtownards Storm Sewer	31/07/2009
KV151	111	Carrickdesland, Burren Foul Sewer Extension	31/07/2009
JR428	111	Belfast City Centre Zone Watermain Improvements	31/07/2009
KA210	111	Moyra Road, Brookfield, Doagh, Foul Sewer Extension	31/07/2009
JR432	113	Whiteabbey Lower, Mains Replacement. Newtownabbey	31/07/2009
KA219	111	Belfast Road, Antrim , Storm Sewer Extension	31/07/2009
JC384	111	Cushendall Road, Ballycastle, Watermain Extension	31/07/2009
JL758	216	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	12/08/2009
JB669	111	Tullycall Road, Cookstown, Watermain Replacement.	12/08/2009
KS831	111	Dermott Park, Comber Storm Sewer Upgrading	12/08/2009
JB653	112	Loan Command SR, Inlet Watermain	12/08/2009
JA270	111	Bellahill, Ballycarry, Co Antrim, Watermain Replacement.	12/08/2009
JG022	112	Castor Bay/ Shanmoy Zone	12/08/2009
JA210	111	Tardree Zone Watermain Imps	12/08/2009
KL390	111	Western Division Minor Works	12/08/2009
JV067	153	Jerrettspass Chlorination	12/08/2009
JA238	113	Antrim Ring Main Relocation	12/08/2009
KG150	111	Moygannon Rd Donaghcloney Civil Contract	17/08/2009
KR401	111	East Belfast Phase 1	25/08/2009

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KB442	111	Tobermore Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	25/08/2009
JS284	113	Portaferry, Ballyquinton area mains replacment.	25/08/2009
KR452	111	Baroda Street / Ormeau Park, Belfast Combined Sewer Overflow	25/08/2009
KB445	111	Pomeroy Main Street Sewer Replacement	26/08/2009
KB428	111	Draperstown Drainage Area Plan	26/08/2009
KC232	118	North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works EC Compliance	26/08/2009
JT128	111	Lisburn Town Zone Watermain Improvements	26/08/2009
JN390	111	Lough Bradan Wastewater Treatment Works Upgrade	02/09/2009
JL723	111	Carmony Water Treatment Works Upgrade	02/09/2009
KG175	111	Cornmarket Street, Tandragee Storm Sewer Extension	03/09/2009
KS348	111	Shimna Rd, Newcastle, Sewer Replacement	07/09/2009
KV091	111	Kiln Lane, Banbridge Sewage Pumoing Station Upgrade	10/09/2009
KL393	111	Ballymonie Wastewater Treatment Works	10/09/2009
KC284	111	Cloughmills Wastewater Treatment Works	10/09/2009
KB322	111	Martinstown Wastewater Treatment Works	10/09/2009
KB333	111	Cargan Wastewater Treatment Works	10/09/2009
JL758	217	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	10/09/2009
JL758	218	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	10/09/2009
KD988	111	Foul Sewer Maghermenagh Gardens Portrush	25/09/2009
KC413	111	Glebe Road, Rasharkin - Sewage Scheme	25/09/2009
JL758	219	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	25/09/2009
KB269	113	Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	25/09/2009
KG103	111	Tullylish Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	25/09/2009
KG068	111	Kiln Road Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade [Lurgan]	25/09/2009
KA195	111	Mullaghboy Wastewater Treatment Works	25/09/2009
KF319	111	Annaghmore Wastewater Treatment Works	25/09/2009
KC406	111	Ballycregagh Road, Cloughmills Foul Sewer Extension	25/09/2009
KS347	111	Crossgar Road, Ballynahinch Storm Sewer	25/09/2009
K0093	111	Ballylough Road Castlewellan	05/10/2009
KR389	112	Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	09/10/2009
JD208	111	Queen St Union Street, Ballymoney Watermain	13/10/2009
JB667	111	Woodtown Road, Ballymena, Watermain Replacement	13/10/2009
KG176	111	Crowhill Road, Bleary, Craigavon. Foul Sewer Extension	13/10/2009

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JB652	151	Frys Road, Ballymena New Watermain	13/10/2009
KV150	111	Forthill Road Newry Foul Sewer Extension	14/10/2009
KG168	111	Lyndale Manor Portadown Foul Sewer Extension	14/10/2009
JA269	112	Castle Road/Whitehill Road Randalstown WM Replacement	14/10/2009
KF325	111	Annaghugh Hill Loughgall, Storm Sewer Extension	14/10/2009
KC343	111	Eagry Road, Bushmills Storm Sewer Extension	14/10/2009
K0173	112	Ballynakilly Sewage Pumping Station	14/10/2009
KG051	111	Sewage Pumping Station Upgrades networks Area A	14/10/2009
JP651	111	Killyhevin WTW replacement acid spillage tank	14/10/2009
KR255	251	Belfast Sewers Project	19/10/2009
KR310	112	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	19/10/2009
KL449	111	Londonderry Drainage Area Plan: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Drumahoe Old PS	19/10/2009
JV835	111	O'Callaghan Road, Silverbridge, Replacement Watermain	20/10/2009
KT113	111	Ravarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	21/10/2009
KN574	111	Ballybrack Road Foul Sewer Extension	21/10/2009
JL758	312	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	23/10/2009
KR425	111	Dunmisk Park Belfast Storm Sewer	23/10/2009
KG170	111	Derrymore Road Aghagallon Storm Sewer Extension	23/10/2009
KG172	113	Wastewater treatment-Provision of maintenance related work at various locations	29/10/2009
JL758	118	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	29/10/2009
KB282	111	Magherafelt Wastewater Treatment Works	29/10/2009
KF320	111	Bush Wastewater Treatment Works	29/10/2009
JP654	111	Erneside Roundabout Road Improvements	29/10/2009
KG172	111	Wastewater treatment-Provision of maintenance related work at various locations	03/11/2009
KA217	111	Ballylagan Road Straid, Storm and Foul Sewers	11/11/2009
JD211	111	Newal Road, Ballymoney Watermain Replacement	11/11/2009
JG036	111	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	16/11/2009
KP351	151	Derrylin Wastewater Treatment Works	16/11/2009
KB434	111	Portglenone Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	16/11/2009
KR391	111	Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	23/11/2009
KS843	111	Stella Maris, Strangford. Sewer Extension	23/11/2009
KV064	111	Lurganare Wastewater Treatment Works	26/11/2009

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KC398	111	Hezlett Primary Sewage Pumping Station Overflow, Castlerock	01/12/2009
KG179	111	Meadowbrook, Craigavon Foul and Storm Sewer Extension	01/12/2009
JV831	111	Watermain Extension at Ballymageough Rd, Kilkeel	01/12/2009
KV157	112	Rathfriland Wastewater Treatment Works Inlet Screens and CSOS	03/12/2009
KV094	111	Whyte Acres, Banbridge Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	03/12/2009
KG104	111	Halls Mill, Laurencetown Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	03/12/2009
KS216	111	Dunmore Sewerage - EC Compliance	03/12/2009
KT125	111	Hook's Corner Wastewater Treatment Works	04/12/2009
KT377	111	New Holland Wastewater Treatment Works	04/12/2009
KD102	111	Hospital Road Magherafelt	09/12/2009
KL450	111	Londonderry Drainage Area Plan: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Caw PS	09/12/2009
KC411	111	Quay Road, Ballycastle, Storm Sewer Extension	09/12/2009
KL443	111	Londonderry Drainage Area Plan: Duke Street Work package	10/12/2009
KL448	111	Londonderry Drainage Area Plan: Victoria road Work Package:CSO Rationalisation	17/12/2009
KL456	111	Londonderry Drainage Area Plan: Sewers Rehab Phase2	17/12/2009
KR453	111	Ellis Street, Carrickfergus, Sewer replacement/ rehabilitation	17/12/2009
JL758	311	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	21/12/2009
KS832	111	Gransha Road, Bangor WWPS Refurbishment	21/12/2009
JL758	116	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	21/12/2009
JR151	213	West Belfast/ North Lisburn	21/12/2009
KV073	111	Windmill Road Sewage Pumping Station Replacement Sewer	12/01/2010
KD985	111	Torrens Pk/Finvoy Rd Ballymoney Combined Relief Sewers	12/01/2010
JL758	315	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	12/01/2010
JL758	314	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	12/01/2010
JV836	111	Moneydarragh Road, Annalong, Replacement Watermain	21/01/2010
KI462	151	PLC Robustness Project	21/01/2010
KP597	111	Enniskillen New Acute Hospital Foul PM Extension	21/01/2010
KL438	111	Greenhaw Rd Storm Sewer Extension, Londonderry	21/01/2010

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KN616	111	Derry Road, Strabane Storm Sewer	21/01/2010
KB436	112	Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	27/01/2010
KS372	112	Market Street SPS Upgrade, Downpatrick	29/01/2010
KA220	111	Mill Brae, Larne , Storm Sewer Extension	29/01/2010
JD974	111	Ballymoney Road and Meadow Street Ballymena Mains Replacement	29/01/2010
JL753	111	A2 (Maydown) Dualling - Watermain and Sewer Alterations	09/02/2010
KG145	111	Derrytrasna Wastewater Treatment Works Upgrade	09/02/2010
JR375	111	A55 Knock Road Belfast Widening	09/02/2010
KN533	111	Rousky Sewerage Scheme	09/02/2010
JA210	193	Tardree Zone Watermaions Improvements	23/06/2009
JA250	191	Kilbride Road/Bryantang Road, Doagh, Watermain Extension	02/04/2007
JA251	192	Crosshill Service Reservoir Water Booster Station, Larne	04/09/2007
JA252	191	Castle Road, Antrim, Watermain	10/12/2007
JA254	191	Birchill Road Antrim Watermain	10/09/2008
JA254	192	Birchill Road Antrim Watermain	10/09/2008
JA260	191	Clonkeen, Randalstown, Replacement Watermain	12/08/2008
JA260	192	Clonkeen, Randalstown, Replacement Watermain	12/08/2008
JA261	191	Old Ballybracken Road Barnish Road Kells Replacement Watermain	28/05/2008
JA265	191	Enkalon Industrial Park, Randalstown Road, Antrim, Watermain Extension	26/09/2008
JA269	191	Castle Road/Whitehill Road Randalstown WM Replacement	07/07/2009
JB517	193	Cookstown Zone Watermains Improvements	19/11/2007
JB517	194	Cookstown Zone Watermains Improvements	19/11/2007
JB583	191	Oak Park, Draperstown Replacement. Watermain.	04/09/2007
JB599	191	Killycurragh Rd. 2006 W/atermain Extension	12/08/2008
JB623	191	Northern Key Transport Corridor, Ballymena Watermain Scheme	28/05/2008
JB623	192	Northern Key Transport Corridor, Ballymena Watermain Scheme	28/05/2008
JB623	193	Northern Key Transport Corridor, Ballymena Watermain Scheme	28/05/2008
JB624	191	Ballymacombs Road	12/08/2008

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JB637	193	Dunmore Lane, Cookstown, Watermain Extension	17/12/2007
JB638	191	Kildowney Hill, Glarryford, Replacement Watermain	20/02/2009
JB647	191	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	07/02/2008
JB647	192	Reservoir Rehabilitation Northern Area - Phase 2	07/02/2008
JB648	191	Dungonnell Command Service Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB648	192	Dungonnell Command Service Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB648	193	Dungonnell Command Service Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB648	194	Dungonnell Command Service Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB648	196	Dungonnell Command Service Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB652	191	Frys Road, Ballymena New Watermain	28/01/2009
JB652	192	Frys Road, Ballymena New Watermain	28/01/2009
JB653	191	Loan Command SR, Inlet Watermain	16/01/2009
JB653	192	Loan Command SR, Inlet Watermain	16/01/2009
JB653	193	Loan Command SR, Inlet Watermain	16/01/2009
JB654	191	Aughnahoy Road, Portglenone Watermain Extension	09/07/2008
JB655	191	Mullaghboy Road, Bellaghy, Watermain Replacement	17/10/2008
JB656	191	Magherafelt Road, Tobermore, Watermain Extension	18/05/2009
JB657	191	Garstings Hill SR, Ballymena, Water Pumping station.	18/01/2010
JB659	191	Old Portglenone Road, Portglenone, Watermain Trunk	11/03/2009
JB660	191	Lough Fea Road, Cookstown, Watermain Replacement.	10/09/2008
JB665	191	Tullaghans SR, Dunloy, New Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB665	192	Tullaghans SR, Dunloy, New Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB665	193	Tullaghans SR, Dunloy, New Reservoir	18/05/2009
JB665	194	Tullaghans SR, Dunloy, New Reservoir	18/05/2009
JC336	191	Altnahinch and Seagahan WTW's Residual Sludge Disposal	23/12/2008
JC336	192	Altnahinch and Seagahan WTW's Residual Sludge Disposal	23/12/2008
JC336	193	Altnahinch and Seagahan WTW's Residual Sludge Disposal	23/12/2008
JC337	191	Greystone Crescent, Drevock Repl. Wm.	20/03/2009
JC349	193	Portballintrae Zone Watermain Improvements	08/10/2007
JC349	194	Portballintrae Zone Watermain Improvements	08/10/2007
JC350	193	Ballycastle Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JC350	194	Ballycastle Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009

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JC351	193	Ballynahone Zone Watermain Improvements	08/10/2007
JC351	194	Ballynahone Zone Watermain Improvements	08/10/2007
JC351	195	Ballynahone Zone Watermain Improvements	08/10/2007
JC352	191	Loughguile Zone Watermain Improvements	31/10/2007
JC352	193	Loughguile Zone Watermain Improvements	31/10/2007
JC352	194	Loughguile Zone Watermain Improvements	31/10/2007
JC353	193	Rasharkin Zone Watermain Improvements	18/10/2007
JC353	194	Rasharkin Zone Watermain Improvements	18/10/2007
JC375	191	Carnamoney Lane, Draperstown, Watermain Extension	12/08/2008
JC378	191	Glenlough SR, Ballymoney, New Service Reservoir	10/10/2008
JC378	192	Glenlough SR, Ballymoney, New SR	10/10/2008
JC378	193	Glenlough SR, Ballymoney, New SR	10/10/2008
JC381	191	Altnahinch WTP, Ballymoney, New CWB.	10/06/2009
JC381	192	Altnahinch WTP, Ballymoney, New CWB.	10/06/2009
JC381	194	Altnahinch WTP, Ballymoney, New CWB.	10/06/2009
JC381	195	Altnahinch WTP, Ballymoney, New CWB.	10/06/2009
JC381	196	Altnahinch WTP, Ballymoney, New CWB.	10/06/2009
JC381	197	Altnahinch WTP, Ballymoney, New CWB.	10/06/2009
JF006	191	Altmore/Gortlenaghan Zone Watermain Improvements	18/03/2008
JF006	192	Altmore/Gortlenaghan Zone Watermain Improvements	18/03/2008
JF006	193	Altmore/Gortlenaghan Zone Watermain Improvements	18/03/2008
JF006	194	Altmore/Gortlenaghan Zone Watermain Improvements	18/03/2008
JF047	191	Seagahan Water Treatment Works Residual Sludge Disposal	28/01/2009
JF563	191	Seagahan Water Treatment Works	26/06/2007
JF563	192	Seagahan Water Treatment Works	26/06/2007
JF563	193	Seagahan Water Treatment Works	26/06/2007
JF563	194	Seagahan Water Treatment Works	26/06/2007
JF569	191	Ballygawley/CabraghSR Link Main	27/06/2007
JF574	192	Carland Bridge (Cookstown Rd) Road Realignment	26/09/2007
JF574	193	Carland Bridge (Cookstown Rd) Road Realignment	26/09/2007
JF574	194	Carland Bridge (Cookstown Rd) Road Realignment	26/09/2007
JF576	191	Lisbeg Rd Watermain Extension (2007)	08/08/2007
JF579	192	Dungannon to Ballygawley (A4) Dualling Watermain Diversions	02/04/2008

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JF579	193	Dungannon to Ballygawley (A4) Dualling Watermain Diversions	02/04/2008
JF583	191	Carland Service Reservoir	23/12/2008
JF583	194	Carland Service Reservoir	23/12/2008
JG018	193	Castor Bay/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JG018	194	Castor Bay/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JG019	191	Castor Bay/Craigavon North Watermain Rehabilitation	25/02/2008
JG019	192	Castor Bay/Craigavon North Watermain Rehabilitation	25/02/2008
JG019	193	Castor Bay/Craigavon North Watermain Rehabilitation	25/02/2008
JG019	194	Castor Bay/Craigavon North Watermain Rehabilitation	25/02/2008
JG021	193	Castor Bay/Craigavon South Zone Watermain Rehabilitation	11/03/2008
JG021	194	Castor Bay/Craigavon South Zone Watermain Rehabilitation	11/03/2008
JG022	193	Castor Bay/ Shanmoy Zone	21/03/2008
JG022	194	Castor Bay/ Shanmoy Zone	21/03/2008
JG035	191	Ballydougan to Newry Main Link Reinforcement	26/10/2009
JG035	193	Ballydougan to Newry Main Link Reinforcement	26/10/2009
JG035	194	Ballydougan to Newry Main Link Reinforcement	26/10/2009
JG035	195	Ballydougan to Newry Main Link Reinforcement	26/10/2009
JG036	191	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	23/12/2008
JG036	192	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	23/12/2008
JG036	193	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	23/12/2008
JG036	196	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	23/12/2008
JG036	197	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	23/12/2008
JG036	198	Castor Bay to Dungannon Strategic Trunk Mains	23/12/2008
JG062	192	Lisnisky Lane/Portadown Road, Portadown	27/04/2007
JG073	191	Lurgan & Portadown Public Realm Associated Infrastructure Improvements	31/03/2009
JG073	192	Lurgan & Portadown Public Realm Associated Infrastructure Improvements	31/03/2009
JG073	193	Lurgan & Portadown Public Realm Associated Infrastructure Improvements	31/03/2009
JL697	191	Waterside Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JL697	192	Waterside Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JL697	193	Waterside Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009

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JL697	194	Waterside Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JL698	193	Carmoney East Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JL698	194	Carmoney East Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JL699	191	Limavady Zone Watermain Improvements	21/11/2008
JL699	192	Limavady Zone Watermain Improvements	21/11/2008
JL699	193	Limavady Zone Watermain Improvements	21/11/2008
JL699	194	Limavady Zone Watermain Improvements	21/11/2008
JL699	196	Limavady Zone Watermain Improvements	21/11/2008
JL723	191	Carmoney Water Treatment Works Upgrade	04/02/2009
JL723	192	Carmoney Water Treatment Works Upgrade	04/02/2009
JL723	193	Carmoney Water Treatment Works Upgrade	04/02/2009
JL723	194	Carmoney Water Treatment Works Upgrade	04/02/2009
JL743	191	Removal of Stradreagh Spring Source	19/04/2007
JL747	191	Repair of GAC Filters at Carmoney WTW	20/11/2007
JL750	191	Ballinrees to Limavady/Londonderry Supply Augmentation	05/01/2010
JL750	192	Ballinrees to Limavady/Londonderry Supply Augmentation	05/01/2010
JL750	193	Ballinrees to Limavady/Londonderry Supply Augmentation	05/01/2010
JL751	191	Brishey Springs Decommissioning, Dungiven	10/01/2008
JL751	192	Brishey Springs Decommissioning, Dungiven	10/01/2008
JL752	191	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	07/02/2008
JL752	192	Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase 2	07/02/2008
JL753	191	A2 (Maydown) Dualling - Watermain and Sewer Alterations	26/10/2009
JL754	191	Londonderry City Centre Public Realm Replacement Watermains	10/02/2009
JL754	192	Londonderry City Centre Public Realm Replacement Watermains	10/02/2009
JL754	193	Londonderry City Centre Public Realm Replacement Watermains	10/02/2009
JL758	191	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	09/02/2009
JL758	192	Reservoir Rehabilitation Programme Phase 3	09/02/2009
JN355	191	North Tyrone Zone Watermain Improvements	21/03/2008
JN355	192	North Tyrone Zone Watermain Improvements	21/03/2008
JN355	193	North Tyrone Zone Watermain Improvements	21/03/2008

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JN355	194	North Tyrone Zone Watermain Improvements	21/03/2008
JN355	195	North Tyrone Zone Watermain Improvements	21/03/2008
JN368	191	Derg - Omagh Area Transfer Pumps	20/11/2007
JN368	192	Derg - Omagh Area Transfer Pumps	20/11/2007
JN368	193	Derg - Omagh Area Transfer Pumps	20/11/2007
JN390	192	Lough Bradan Water Treatment Works Upgrade	27/04/2009
JN390	193	Lough Bradan Water Treatment Works Upgrade	27/04/2009
JN390	194	Lough Bradan Water Treatment Works Upgrade	27/04/2009
JN390	195	Lough Bradan Water Treatment Works Upgrade	27/04/2009
JN390	197	Lough Bradan Water Treatment Works Upgrade	27/04/2009
JN417	191	Brook Rd. Donemana Replacement Watermain.	24/11/2009
JN428	193	Derg West Zone Watermain Improvements	25/02/2008
JN428	194	Derg West Zone Watermain Improvements	25/02/2008
JN476	192	Inisclan Pumping Main Extension	19/04/2007
JN480	191	Dunnamona Road, Omagh. Replacement Watermain.	13/05/2008
JN481	191	Cornavarrow, Omagh. Replacement Watermain	13/05/2008
JN482	192	Killymore Road, Gortin Pumping Station	17/08/2007
JN484	191	Glenhordial Water Treatment Works replacement of Camowen pumping main	28/05/2008
JN488	191	Aghyaran Road Booster Station	25/02/2009
JN489	191	Camowen River/Killyclogher Road Watermain Replacement	13/03/2008
JN489	192	Camowen River/Killyclogher Road Watermain Replacement	13/03/2008
JN493	191	Georgian Villas, Omagh Replacement Watermain	13/03/2008
JN493	192	Georgian Villas, Omagh Replacement Watermain	13/03/2008
JN493	193	Georgian Villas, Omagh Replacement Watermain	13/03/2008
JN494	191	Rodgers Road, Tattykeel Watermain Extension	29/04/2008
JN496	191	Clanabogan Road Mullaghbane Replacement Watermain	13/10/2009
JP610	191	Meenacloyabane Service Reservoir	21/11/2007
JP610	192	Meenacloyabane Service Reservoir	21/11/2007
JP610	193	Meenacloyabane Service Reservoir	21/11/2007
JP624	191	Donagh To Ballagh Cross Replacement Watermain	17/06/2009
JP651	191	Killyhevin Water Treatment Works replacement acid spillage tank	03/08/2009

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JP653	191	Enniskillen New Hospital Watermain Extension	25/02/2008
JP656	191	Croaghlim Rd, Enniskillen Replacement Watermain	20/08/2008
JP657	191	Thompsons Bridge Rep Watermain, Derrylin, Enniskillen	28/10/2009
JP662	191	A32 Cherrymount Link Road, Enniskillen - WaterMain Realignment	16/11/2009
JR302	193	Purdysburn East Zone Watermain Improvements	10/07/2007
JR302	194	Purdysburn East Zone Watermain Improvements	10/07/2007
JR304	191	Castlereagh Zone Watermain Improvements	10/07/2007
JR304	192	Castlereagh Zone Watermain Improvements	10/07/2007
JR304	193	Castlereagh Zone Watermain Improvements	10/07/2007
JR304	194	Castlereagh Zone Watermain Improvements	10/07/2007
JR304	195	Castlereagh Zone Watermain Improvements	10/07/2007
JR367	191	Service Reservoir Enhanced Security	17/12/2007
JR372	191	M1/Westlink Watermain and Sewers Diversions	26/09/2007
JR375	191	A55 Knock Road Belfast Widening	01/10/2008
JR375	192	A55 Knock Road Belfast Widening	01/10/2008
JR377	191	Hightown Road, Newtownabbey Watermain.	21/08/2007
JR400	191	A2 Shore Road Re-alignment – Greenisland	28/05/2008
JR400	193	A2 Shore Road Re-alignment – Greenisland	28/05/2008
JR400	194	A2 Shore Road Re-alignment – Greenisland	28/05/2008
JR404	191	Belfast City Centre Public Realm Phase 1, Area 1	06/06/2007
JR404	192	Belfast City Centre Public Realm Phase 1, Area 1	06/06/2007
JR407	191	Security improvements at Keypoint Installations	22/12/2009
JR407	192	Security improvements at Keypoint Installations	22/12/2009
JR408	191	Belfast City Centre public Realm Phase 1, Area 3	03/01/2008
JR408	193	Belfast City Centre public Realm Phase 1, Area 3	03/01/2008
JR412	191	Hydepark To Purdysburn Trunk Main, Connection At Newtownbreda Road.	02/04/2008
JR414	191	Reservoir Rehabilitation South East Area Phase 2	11/06/2008
JR416	191	CTM Extension - Barnetts Park to Purdysburn	18/05/2009
JR416	192	CTM Extension - Barnetts Park to Purdysburn	18/05/2009
JR416	193	CTM Extension - Barnetts Park to Purdysburn	18/05/2009
JR416	194	CTM Extension - Barnetts Park to Purdysburn	18/05/2009
JR423	191	Thornberry Hill, Wolfhill Mains Extension, Ligoneil, Belfast	23/10/2008

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JR424	191	Betterment and Deferment of Renewal for Mains Diversion at QUB Playing Fields	22/01/2009
JR427	191	Mains replacement ,Belfast Public Realm Phase 1 Area 2	27/03/2009
JR428	193	Belfast City Centre Zone Watermain Improvements	23/02/2009
JR428	194	Belfast City Centre Zone Watermain Improvements	23/02/2009
JR428	195	Belfast City Centre Zone Watermain Improvements	23/02/2009
JR429	191	First Time Services Visteon Site.Finaghy Road North,Belfast	20/02/2009
JR432	191	Whiteabbey Lower, Mains Replacement. Newtownabbey	05/06/2009
JR432	192	Whiteabbey Lower, Mains Replacement. Newtownabbey	05/06/2009
JS219	191	North Down,Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS219	192	North Down,Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS219	193	North Down,Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS219	194	North Down,Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS219	195	North Down,Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS219	196	North Down,Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS222	191	Newtownards Town Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS222	192	Newtownards Town Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS222	194	Newtownards Town Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS222	195	Newtownards Town Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS222	196	Newtownards Town Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS222	197	Newtownards Town Zone Watermain Improvements	11/03/2008
JS223	193	Ballygowan Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JS223	194	Ballygowan Zone Watermain Improvements	20/03/2009
JS225	191	Mid Down Zone Watermain Improvements	24/03/2009
JS225	192	Mid Down Zone Watermain Improvements	24/03/2009
JS225	193	Mid Down Zone Watermain Improvements	24/03/2009
JS225	194	Mid Down Zone Watermain Improvements	24/03/2009
JS225	195	Mid Down Zone Watermain Improvements	24/03/2009
JS227	191	South Down Zone Watermain Improvements	03/08/2009
JS227	192	South Down Zone Watermain Improvements	03/08/2009
JS227	193	South Down Zone Watermain Improvements	03/08/2009
JS227	194	South Down Zone Watermain Improvements	03/08/2009
JS268	191	Newtownards Southern Relief Road	03/03/2008
JS276	191	Kilmegan Road, Dundrum, Watermain	08/08/2007

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JS278	191	Saintfield Road, Ballygowan, Replacement Watermain	09/07/2008
JS278	192	Saintfield Road, Ballygowan, Replacement Watermain	09/07/2008
JS279	191	Ballygowan Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Replacement	09/07/2008
JS280	191	Ballycreelly Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Replacement	09/07/2008
JS280	192	Ballycreelly Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Replacement	09/07/2008
JS281	191	Fields at Ballycreelly Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Replacement	09/07/2008
JS281	192	Fields at Ballycreelly Road, Ballygowan, Watermain Replacement	09/07/2008
JS284	191	Portaferry, Ballyquinton area mains replacement.	18/05/2009
JS284	192	Portaferry, Ballyquinton area mains replacement.	18/05/2009
JS284	193	Portaferry, Ballyquinton area mains replacement.	18/05/2009
JT126	191	Lisburn North Rural Zone Watermain Improvements	03/03/2008
JT126	192	Lisburn North Rural Zone Watermain Improvements	03/03/2008
JT126	193	Lisburn North Rural Zone Watermain Improvements	03/03/2008
JT126	195	Lisburn North Rural Zone Watermain Improvements	03/03/2008
JT128	193	Lisburn Town Zone Watermain Improvements	31/03/2009
JT128	194	Lisburn Town Zone Watermain Improvements	31/03/2009
JT149	191	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	03/03/2008
JT149	193	Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements	03/03/2008
JV023	191	Fofanny/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	31/10/2007
JV023	192	Fofanny/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	31/10/2007
JV023	193	Fofanny/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	31/10/2007
JV023	194	Fofanny/Banbridge Zone Watermain Improvements	31/10/2007
JV819	191	McShanes Road, Bressbrook Watermain Extension	06/09/2007
JV820	191	Carron Hill Supply Zone Management Plan	21/01/2008
JV820	192	Carron Hill Supply Zone Management Plan	21/01/2008
JV820	193	Carron Hill Supply Zone Management Plan	21/01/2008
JV827	191	Tullyhappy Service Reservoir	04/12/2009
JV827	192	Tullyhappy Service Reservoir	04/12/2009
JV828	191	Shot Lane / Fedney Hill Road Banbridge Watermains Upgrade	23/10/2008
JV831	191	Watermain Extension at Ballymageough Rd, Kilkeel	07/07/2009
JV836	191	Moneydarragh Road, Annalong, Replacement Watermain	16/11/2009
KA143	191	Aldergrove Sewerage Scheme	01/10/2008

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KA143	192	Aldergrove Sewerage Scheme	01/10/2008
KA143	193	Aldergrove Sewerage Scheme	01/10/2008
KA143	194	Aldergrove Sewerage Scheme	01/10/2008
KA151	191	Roughfort Wastewater Treatment Works	16/10/2008
KA153	191	Castledawson Sewerage Rationalisation	22/01/2008
KA153	192	Castledawson Sewerage Rationalisation	22/01/2008
KA164	191	Parkgate Wastewater Treatment Works Rationalization	16/11/2009
KA164	192	Parkgate Wastewater Treatment Works Rationalization	16/11/2009
KA166	191	Dunadry Road, Templepatrick Foul Sewer	21/04/2008
KA168	191	Milltown Road Antrim	22/05/2008
KA168	192	Milltown Road Antrim	22/05/2008
KA190	191	Newlodge Road Antrim - Foul Sewer Extension	12/02/2008
KA195	192	Mullaghboy Wastewater Treatment Works	20/02/2009
KA195	193	Mullaghboy Wastewater Treatment Works	20/02/2009
KA195	195	Mullaghboy Wastewater Treatment Works	20/02/2009
KA196	191	Glenarm Sewage Pumping Station	20/02/2009
KA196	192	Glenarm Sewage Pumping Station	20/02/2009
KA199	191	Antrim Rd, Aldergrove - Trunk Sewer Replacement	31/10/2007
KA199	192	Antrim Rd, Aldergrove - Trunk Sewer Replacement	31/10/2007
KA200	192	Ballycorr Road, Ballyclare, Storm Outfall	12/12/2007
KA202	192	The Woods, Old Glenarm Road, Larne, Storm Sewer Outfall	18/10/2007
KA202	193	The Woods, Old Glenarm Road, Larne, Storm Sewer Outfall	18/10/2007
KA203	192	Huntingdale Way Ballyclare – Sewage Pumping Station Rationalisation	21/11/2007
KA206	191	Small Wastewater Treatment Works Priority Upgrades	26/03/2008
KA206	192	Small Wastewater Treatment Works Priority Upgrades	26/03/2008
KA207	191	Exchange Avenue, Doagh, Storm Sewer Extension	23/02/2009
KA208	191	Main Street, Crumlin Storm Sewer Outfall (Tesco)	27/03/2009
KA210	191	Moyra Road, Brookfield, Doagh, Foul Sewer Extension	19/06/2009
KA211	191	Old Glenarm Road, Larne, Foul Sewer Extension	03/08/2009
KA217	191	Ballylagan Road Straid, Storm and Foul Sewers	13/10/2009
KA219	191	Belfast Road, Antrim , Storm Sewer Extension	19/06/2009
KA220	191	Mill Brae, Larne , Storm Sewer Extension	05/01/2010

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KB269	191	Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	03/08/2009
KB269	192	Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	03/08/2009
KB269	193	Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	03/08/2009
KB269	194	Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	03/08/2009
KB269	195	Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	03/08/2009
KB269	196	Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	03/08/2009
KB278	191	Moneymore SewageTreatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB278	192	Moneymore SewageTreatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB278	193	Moneymore SewageTreatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB278	194	Moneymore SewageTreatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB279	191	Stewartstown Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB279	192	Stewartstown Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB279	193	Stewartstown Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB279	194	Stewartstown Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB280	192	Draperstown Wastewater Treatment Works	10/12/2007
KB280	194	Draperstown Wastewater Treatment Works	10/12/2007
KB280	195	Draperstown Wastewater Treatment Works	10/12/2007
KB282	191	Magherafelt Wastewater Treatment Works	15/09/2008
KB282	192	Magherafelt Wastewater Treatment Works	15/09/2008
KB282	193	Magherafelt Wastewater Treatment Works	15/09/2008
KB284	191	Coagh Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB284	192	Coagh Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB284	194	Coagh Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB284	195	Coagh Wastewater Treatment Works Improvements	04/02/2009
KB285	191	Sandhole Wastewater Treatment Works .	22/01/2008
KB321	191	Knockloughrim Wastewater Treatment Works Outfall	01/10/2008
KB322	191	Martinstown Wastewater Treatment Works	23/04/2009
KB333	192	Cargan Wastewater Treatment Works	23/04/2009
KB376	191	Straw Village Sewer Upgrades	28/02/2008
KB397	191	Old Portglenone Road Ahoghill, Foul Sewer Extension	02/05/2008
KB400	191	Mullanahoe Road Ardboe Foul Sewer	09/07/2008
KB400	192	Mullanahoe Road Ardboe Foul Sewer	09/07/2008

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KB409	192	Lissan Road Cookstown Replacement Storm Sewer	28/01/2009
KB411	191	Milburn Storm Sewer	15/05/2008
KB412	191	Cookstown Road Moneymore Foul Sewer Extension	26/03/2008
KB413	191	Dunnamore Road, Dunnamore Storm Sewer Ext	05/08/2008
KB422	191	Killyfaddy Road Magherafelt Sewerage Scheme	22/09/2008
KB422	192	Killyfaddy Road Magherafelt Sewerage Scheme	22/09/2008
KB425	191	Caherty Road, Broughshane	17/10/2008
KB425	192	Caherty Road, Broughshane	17/10/2008
KB428	191	Draperstown Drainage Area Plan	23/06/2009
KB428	192	Draperstown Drainage Area Plan	23/06/2009
KB428	193	Draperstown Drainage Area Plan	23/06/2009
KB429	191	Tamneylennan - Stewartstown Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	18/05/2009
KB430	191	Derrynoyd Road Draperstown Foul & Storm Sewer Extension	01/04/2009
KB431	191	The Brambles, Magherafelt – Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	07/03/2008
KB434	191	Portglenone Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	03/08/2009
KB434	192	Portglenone Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	03/08/2009
KB434	193	Portglenone Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	03/08/2009
KB436	191	Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	18/05/2009
KB436	192	Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	18/05/2009
KB436	193	Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	18/05/2009
KB436	194	Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	18/05/2009
KB436	195	Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	18/05/2009
KB436	196	Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	18/05/2009
KB437	191	Whitewater Bridge Straw Foul Sewer Extension	26/01/2009
KB439	191	Kilmascally Road, Ardboe, Storm Sewer	22/09/2008
KB440	191	Broughshane Road, Ballymena, Foul Sewer Extension	03/09/2008
KB442	191	Tobermore Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	19/06/2009
KB442	192	Tobermore Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	19/06/2009
KB442	193	Tobermore Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	19/06/2009
KB444	191	Burn Road Cookstown Storm Sewer Extension	09/12/2008
KB445	191	Pomeroy Main Street Sewer Replacement	03/08/2009
KB445	192	Pomeroy Main Street Sewer Replacement	03/08/2009

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KC218	292	Portrush Sewer Improvements Stage 4	25/02/2008
KC218	293	Portrush Sewer Improvements Stage 4	25/02/2008
KC218	294	Portrush Sewer Improvements Stage 4	25/02/2008
KC231	191	Ballycastle Sewerage Scheme	18/02/2008
KC231	192	Ballycastle Sewerage Scheme	18/02/2008
KC284	191	Cloughmills Wastewater Treatment Works	23/04/2009
KC288	191	Ballybogey Wastewater Treatment Works	28/01/2009
KC288	193	Ballybogey Wastewater Treatment Works	28/01/2009
KC288	194	Ballybogey Wastewater Treatment Works	28/01/2009
KC288	195	Ballybogey Wastewater Treatment Works	28/01/2009
KC299	191	Bushmills + Portballintrae Wastewater Treatment Works	17/12/2007
KC299	192	Bushmills + Portballintrae Wastewater Treatment Works	17/12/2007
KC299	193	Bushmills + Portballintrae Wastewater Treatment Works	17/12/2007
KC313	191	Rasharkin Flood Alleviation and Sewer Extension	25/02/2008
KC313	192	Rasharkin Flood Alleviation and Sewer Extension	25/02/2008
KC324	191	Anticur Rd/Carrowadoon Road, Dunloy Sewerage Scheme	25/02/2008
KC324	192	Anticur Rd/Carrowadoon Road, Dunloy Sewerage Scheme	25/02/2008
KC337	191	Moneygran Road Kilrea Foul and Storm Sewers	02/02/2009
KC343	191	Eagry Road, Bushmills Storm Sewer Extension	01/05/2008
KC347	191	Froces Road Ballymoney Foul Sewer	01/02/2008
KC349	191	Church Road Rasharkin Storm Sewer Extension	09/02/2009
KC351	191	Station Road Dervock Foul Sewer	18/10/2007
KC351	192	Station Road Dervock Foul Sewer	18/10/2007
KC352	191	Castleroe Road Coleraine Foul Sewer Extension	18/10/2007
KC353	191	Knock Road Ballymoney Foul & Storm Sewer Extension	20/08/2008
KC354	191	Priestland Rd, Bushmills St Sew Ext	01/02/2008
KC355	191	Bravallan Road Ballymoney Storm Sewer	08/08/2007
KC355	192	Bravallan Road Ballymoney Storm Sewer	08/08/2007
KC389	191	Mountsandel Road, Coleraine - Sewer Upgrade	02/02/2009
KC393	191	Mounthamilton Road, Cloughmills - Foul Sewer Extension	09/10/2008
KC394	192	Mounthamilton Sewage Pumping Station, Cloughmills Replacement	27/08/2008
KC395	191	St Patricks Avenue, Coleraine - Sewer Repair.	19/09/2007

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KC396	191	Mussenden Road, Articlave, Storm Sewer Extension	11/06/2008
KC396	192	Mussenden Road, Articlave, Storm Sewer Extension	11/06/2008
KC397	191	Castlerock Road Coleraine - Storm Sewer	23/04/2009
KC397	192	Castlerock Road Coleraine - Storm Sewer	23/04/2009
KC398	191	Hezlett Primary S.P.S. Overflow, Castlerock	20/08/2008
KC403	191	Old Coleraine Road, Portstewart - Storm Sewer Extension.	23/02/2009
KC405	191	McClelland Park Dunloy Flood Alleviation DG5	23/12/2008
KC406	191	Ballycregagh Road, Cloughmills Foul Sewer Extension	18/05/2009
KC407	191	Middlepark Road, Cushendall, Relief Sewer	09/07/2008
KC409	191	Drumavoley Park, Ballycastle Foul Sewer.	03/03/2009
KC409	192	Drumavoley Park, Ballycastle Foul Sewer.	03/03/2009
KC410	191	Beach Road, Portballintrae, Storm Sewer Extension	09/02/2010
KC411	191	Quay Road, Ballycastle, Storm Sewer Extension	16/11/2009
KC413	191	Glebe Road, Rasharkin - Sewage Scheme	20/08/2009
KC417	191	Mill Street , Ballycastle, Storm Sewer Outfall	13/10/2009
KD034	191	Knockloughrim Storm Sewer	22/09/2008
KD041	191	Moyle Rd Ballycastle	21/03/2008
KD041	192	Moyle Rd Ballycastle	21/03/2008
KD102	191	Hospital Road Magherafelt	16/11/2009
KD102	192	Hospital Road Magherafelt	16/11/2009
KD102	193	Hospital Road Magherafelt	16/11/2009
KD106	191	Tamnymullan Lane, Maghera	15/12/2008
KD141	191	Headland Avenue Storm relief sewer	23/02/2009
KD608	191	Sandholes Rd SS Cookstown	17/10/2008
KD608	197	Sandholes Rd SS Cookstown	17/10/2008
KD705	191	Main Street Storm Sewer, Coagh	09/07/2008
KD971	191	Rusky Park, Aghadowey	15/08/2008
KD972	191	The Aird Bushmills	23/06/2008
KD989	191	Niblock Road Antrim	17/06/2009
KF005	191	Coalisland Wastewater Treatment Works	03/09/2008
KF012	191	Moygashel Wastewater Treatment Works	19/11/2008
KF012	192	Moygashel Wastewater Treatment Works	19/11/2008
KF026	191	Hamiltonsbawn Wastewater Treatment Works	07/02/2008

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KF026	193	Hamiltonsbawn Wastewater Treatment Works	07/02/2008
KF026	194	Hamiltonsbawn Wastewater Treatment Works	07/02/2008
KF029	191	Bush Wastewater Treatment Works	27/11/2007
KF030	191	Killyman Wastewater Treatment Works	21/01/2008
KF030	193	Killyman Wastewater Treatment Works	21/01/2008
KF031	192	Cabragh Wastewater Treatment Works	20/11/2007
KF033	192	Castlecaulfield Wastewater Treatment Works	23/07/2008
KF033	193	Castlecaulfield Wastewater Treatment Works	23/07/2008
KF076	191	Gorestown Road Sewerage Scheme	06/09/2007
KF076	193	Gorestown Road Sewerage Scheme	06/09/2007
KF077	191	Poyntzpass WwTW Inlet Sewer Replacement	08/08/2007
KF081	191	Killyman Foul Sewer Extension	21/05/2007
KF081	192	Killyman Foul Sewer Extension	21/05/2007
KF081	193	Killyman Foul Sewer Extension	21/05/2007
KF083	191	Johnston Lodge, Hamiltonsbawn Fowl Sewer extension	30/08/2007
KF083	192	Johnston Lodge, Hamiltonsbawn Fowl Sewer extension	30/08/2007
KF087	191	Laurelvale Main Street Sewage Replacements	13/02/2009
KF312	191	Ashley Gardens Armagh foul sewer replacement	03/03/2008
KF312	192	Ashley Gardens Armagh foul sewer replacement	03/03/2008
KF313	191	Lisanally Special School, Armagh Foul Sewer Replacement	13/06/2008
KF313	192	Lisanally Special School, Armagh Foul Sewer Replacement	13/06/2008
KF315	191	Bracken Court Coalisland Storm Sewer Extension	23/09/2008
KF315	192	Bracken Court Coalisland Storm Sewer Extension	23/09/2008
KF319	191	Annaghmore Wastewater Treatment Works	06/08/2009
KF320	191	Bush Wastewater Treatment Works	30/07/2009
KF320	192	Bush Wastewater Treatment Works	30/07/2009
KF323	191	Tamnamore Road, Killyman Sewage Pumping Main Extension	06/03/2009
KF325	191	Annaghugh Hill Loughgall, Storm Sewer Extension	25/09/2009
KF326	191	Captrax Team Test Project	11/02/2009
KF328	191	Dartan Road Tynan. FST. Pumping Main and Storm Sewer Extension	21/12/2009
KG046	191	Tullygoonigan Sewerage Scheme	23/12/2008
KG046	192	Tullygoonigan Sewerage Scheme	23/12/2008

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KG068	191	Kiln Road Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade [Lurgan]	02/07/2009
KG069	191	Stranmore Road Gilford Sewerage Scheme	02/07/2008
KG085	191	Clonmakate Sewage Pumping Station Replacement	08/08/2007
KG086	191	Moyallen Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	03/08/2009
KG101	191	Martins Yard and Gilford Mill Sewage Pumping Station Rationalisation	12/08/2008
KG102	191	Castle Meadow, Gilford Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	03/09/2009
KG103	191	Tullylish Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	06/08/2009
KG104	191	Halls Mill, Laurencetown Sewage Pumping Station Upgrade	03/09/2009
KG108	192	Lough Road, Lurgan Storm Sewer Extension	03/01/2008
KG112	191	Dunkirk Road to Main Street Waringstown SS	06/08/2008
KG118	191	Crumlin Road Storm Sewer Extension	15/09/2008
KG120	191	Foul Sewer Extension, Garveys Road, Dorsey	12/12/2007
KG121	191	Upper Edward Street Newry	09/02/2009
KG127	191	Madden Road Tandragee Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	17/09/2007
KG131	191	Lurgan Road, Aghalee Storm Sewer Ext	03/04/2007
KG133	191	Madden Road Tandragee Storm Sewer Extension	21/05/2007
KG134	191	Carrick Drive, Banbridge Road Lurgan Storm Sewer Ext	26/04/2007
KG140	191	Waringfield SPS Upgrade	26/10/2009
KG142	191	Banbridge Road Waringstown, Foul Sewer Extension	06/06/2007
KG143	191	Silverwood Golf Course Replacement Sewer	21/05/2007
KG144	191	Lawrencetown Wastewater Treatment Works Upgrade	19/08/2008
KG145	191	Derrytrasna Wastewater Treatment Works Upgrade	16/11/2009
KG146	191	Cloncarrish Road Birches Storm Sewer Extension	11/10/2007
KG147	191	Carbet Road Portadown Storm Sewer	16/08/2007
KG148	191	Mark Street Lurgan Storm Sewer Extension	19/06/2007
KG149	191	Dunkirk Road Waringstown Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	11/06/2007
KG150	191	Moygannon Rd Donaghcloney Civil Contract	19/06/2008
KG153	191	Gilford Road Portadown Sewerage Upgrades	11/02/2008
KG156	192	Crumlin Road Lower Ballinderry Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions	20/03/2009
KG157	191	Maghaberry Flood Alleviation Projects	23/04/2009

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KG158	191	Birches Road to Cloncarrish Road Sewer Extension	23/04/2009
KG163	191	Obins Street Portadown Storm Sewer Extension	23/05/2008
KG164	191	Strawhill Donaghcloney Storm Sewer Extension	19/08/2008
KG165	191	Steps Road, Magheralin Foul & Storm Sewer Extensions	27/11/2008
KG166	191	Gibsons Hill Lurgan Storm Sewer Extension	05/09/2008
KG167	191	Ripley Meadows Portadown Storm Sewer Upgrade	05/06/2009
KG168	191	Lyndale Manor Portadown Foul Sewer Extension	03/09/2009
KG169	191	Derrytrasna Road, Lurgan Sewage Pumping Main Extension	18/05/2009
KG170	191	Derrymore Road Aghagallon Storm Sewer Extension	21/09/2009
KG172	191	Wastewater treatment-Provision of maintenance related work at various locations	29/09/2009
KG172	192	Wastewater treatment-Provision of maintenance related work at various locations	29/09/2009
KG175	191	Cornmarket Street, Tandragee Storm Sewer Extension	16/06/2009
KG176	191	Crowhill Road, Bleary, Craigavon. Foul Sewer Extension	25/09/2009
KG179	191	Meadowbrook, Craigavon Foul and Storm Sewer Extension	28/10/2009
KI462	191	PLC Robustness Project	17/11/2009
KI462	192	PLC Robustness Project	17/11/2009
KI462	193	PLC Robustness Project	17/11/2009
KL300	191	Dungiven Wastewater Treatment Works	02/01/2009
KL345	191	Donnybrewer Wastewater Treatment Works	27/02/2009
KL345	192	Donnybrewer Wastewater Treatment Works	27/02/2009
KL345	193	Donnybrewer Wastewater Treatment Works	27/02/2009
KL350	191	Benone Area Sewerage	11/06/2009
KL363	191	Feeny Wastewater Treatment Works	11/02/2009
KL363	192	Feeny Wastewater Treatment Works	11/02/2009
KL363	193	Feeny Wastewater Treatment Works	11/02/2009
KL388	191	Western Div Minor Works	06/08/2008
KL388	192	Western Div Minor Works	06/08/2008
KL393	191	Ballymonie WwTW	23/04/2009
KL406	191	Wastewater Treatment Works Quick Wins 2005	06/06/2008
KL406	192	Wastewater Treatment Works Quick Wins 2005	06/06/2008
KL410	191	Ballycoleman, Strabane Flood Alleviation Scheme	13/03/2008

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KL410	192	Ballycoleman, Strabane Flood Alleviation Scheme	13/03/2008
KL416	191	Park Wastewater Treatment Works	21/01/2008
KL416	192	Park Wastewater Treatment Works	21/01/2008
KL416	193	Park Wastewater Treatment Works	21/01/2008
KL418	191	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Gransha Pumping Station	31/10/2007
KL418	192	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Gransha Pumping Station	31/10/2007
KL419	191	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Strathfoyle Siphon Storage Tank Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 1 - Strathfoyle Siphon Storage Tank	05/07/2007
KL421	191	Gortinure Road, Gortinwood, Storm and Foul Sewer Extension	05/09/2008
KL421	192	Gortinure Road, Gortinwood, Storm and Foul Sewer Extension	05/09/2008
KL422	191	Airfield Road, Foul Sewer Extension	08/01/2008
KL422	192	Airfield Road, Foul Sewer Extension	08/01/2008
KL423	191	Crevagh Park SPS Abandonment	20/04/2007
KL423	192	Crevagh Park SPS Abandonment	20/04/2007
KL427	191	Ballykelly Main St, Replacement Sewer	12/05/2008
KL427	192	Ballykelly Main St, Replacement Sewer	12/05/2008
KL428	191	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 2 - Duke St PS Group Schemes	25/01/2010
KL428	192	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 2 - Duke St PS Group Schemes	25/01/2010
KL428	193	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 2 - Duke St PS Group Schemes	25/01/2010
KL428	194	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 2 - Duke St PS Group Schemes	25/01/2010
KL428	195	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 2 - Duke St PS Group Schemes	25/01/2010
KL428	196	Londonderry Sewer Improvements Stage 2 - Duke St PS Group Schemes	25/01/2010
KL429	191	Assessment of Flow Monitoring in Wastewater Treatment Works	23/01/2008
KL430	191	Gortnahey Road, Gortnahey, Dungiven Foul Sewer Extension	17/04/2008
KL430	192	Gortnahey Road, Gortnahey, Dungiven Foul Sewer Extension	17/04/2008
KL431	191	Limavady Drainage Area Plan (DAP) stage 1	12/06/2009

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KL431	192	Limavady DAP stage 1	12/06/2009
KL431	193	Limavady DAP stage 1	12/06/2009
KL431	194	Limavady DAP stage 1	12/06/2009
KL435	191	Killary Road Drainage Improvements	23/07/2008
KL435	192	Killary Road Drainage Improvements	23/07/2008
KL437	191	Queens Quay combined sewer diversion Londonderry	07/08/2008
KL437	192	Queens Quay combined sewer diversion Londonderry	07/08/2008
KL438	191	Greenhaw Rd Storm Sewer Extension, Londonderry	21/12/2009
KL438	192	Greenhaw Rd Storm Sewer Extension, Londonderry	21/12/2009
KL439	191	Cregg SPS, Claudy Emergency Overflow	23/12/2008
KL439	192	Cregg SPS, Claudy Emergency Overflow	23/12/2008
KL443	191	Londonderry DAP: Duke Street Work package	16/11/2009
KL443	192	Londonderry DAP: Duke Street Work package	16/11/2009
KL443	193	Londonderry DAP: Duke Street Work package	16/11/2009
KL445	191	Londonderry DAP: Victoria road Work Package	27/01/2010
KL445	192	Londonderry DAP: Victoria road Work Package	27/01/2010
KL445	193	Londonderry DAP: Victoria road Work Package	27/01/2010
KL448	191	Londonderry DAP: Victoria road Work Package:CSO Rationalisation	03/12/2009
KL448	192	Londonderry DAP: Victoria road Work Package:CSO Rationalisation	03/12/2009
KL448	193	Londonderry DAP: Victoria road Work Package:CSO Rationalisation	03/12/2009
KL449	191	Londonderry DAP: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Drumahoe Old PS	25/09/2009
KL449	192	Londonderry DAP: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Drumahoe Old PS	25/09/2009
KL449	193	Londonderry DAP: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Drumahoe Old PS	25/09/2009
KL450	191	Londonderry DAP: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Caw PS	16/11/2009
KL450	192	Londonderry DAP: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Caw PS	16/11/2009
KL450	193	Londonderry DAP: Strathfoyle & Drumahoe Work package: Caw PS	16/11/2009
KL452	191	Campsie SPS Emergency O/F Redirection.	21/11/2008
KL452	192	Campsie SPS Emergency O/F Redirection.	21/11/2008

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KL455	191	Londonderry DAP: Sewers Rehab Phase1	27/01/2010
KL455	192	Londonderry DAP: Sewers Rehab Phase1	27/01/2010
KL456	191	Londonderry DAP: Sewers Rehab Phase2	16/11/2009
KL456	192	Londonderry DAP: Sewers Rehab Phase2	16/11/2009
KL456	193	Londonderry DAP: Sewers Rehab Phase2	16/11/2009
KL457	191	Londonderry DAP: Storm Screening	20/03/2009
KL457	192	Londonderry DAP: Storm Screening	20/03/2009
KL457	193	Londonderry DAP: Storm Screening	20/03/2009
KL459	191	Limavady DAP: Stage 2, Roe Mill Road Sewer Upgrades	16/06/2009
KL459	192	Limavady DAP: Stage 2, Roe Mill Road Sewer Upgrades	16/06/2009
KL459	193	Limavady DAP: Stage 2, Roe Mill Road Sewer Upgrades	16/06/2009
KN157	191	Cranagh WwTW	28/01/2009
KN157	192	Cranagh WwTW	28/01/2009
KN157	193	Cranagh WwTW	28/01/2009
KN533	193	Rousky Sewerage Scheme	21/12/2009
KN556	192	Mountfield WwTW	11/11/2008
KN583	191	Beragh Foul & Storm Sewer	20/04/2007
KN583	192	Beragh Foul & Storm Sewer	20/04/2007
KN584	191	Gortin Road Omagh Storm Sewer	05/07/2007
KN584	192	Gortin Road Omagh Storm Sewer	05/07/2007
KN586	191	Killen WWTW	05/07/2007
KN586	192	Killen WWTW	05/07/2007
KN592	191	Crevanagh Road, Omagh, Foul Sewer Pumping Main Extension	08/01/2008
KN592	192	Crevanagh Road, Omagh, Foul Sewer Pumping Main Extension	08/01/2008
KN605	191	Loughmacrory Storm Sewer Extension.	03/09/2007
KN605	192	Loughmacrory Storm Sewer Extension.	03/09/2007
KN607	191	Creagmore Road, Drumquin Foul Sewer Extension	06/09/2007
KN607	192	Creagmore Road, Drumquin Foul Sewer Extension	06/09/2007
KN610	191	Drumlegagh Storm Sewer Extension	25/11/2008
KN610	192	Drumlegagh Storm Sewer Extension	25/11/2008
KN612	191	Strathroy, Omagh Storm Sewer	16/10/2008
KN612	192	Strathroy, Omagh Storm Sewer	16/10/2008
KN616	191	Derry Road, Strabane Storm Sewer	01/12/2009

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KN616	192	Derry Road, Strabane Storm Sewer	01/12/2009
KP351	192	Derrylin Wastewater Treatment Works	17/08/2007
KP351	193	Derrylin Wastewater Treatment Works	17/08/2007
KP373	191	Galliagh Park Enniskillen Replacement Sewers	08/02/2008
KP373	192	Galliagh Park Enniskillen Replacement Sewers	08/02/2008
KP587	191	Lisnagole Road Lisnaskea Foul Sewer Extension	08/08/2007
KP588	191	ST Patricks Terrace, Lisnaskea Flood Alleviation Scheme	03/06/2008
KP588	192	ST Patricks Terrace, Lisnaskea Flood Alleviation Scheme	03/06/2008
KP590	191	Loaneden, Kesh SPS Upgrade and PN Extension	07/07/2009
KP590	192	Loaneden, Kesh SPS Upgrade and PN Extension	07/07/2009
KP591	191	New foul sewer for H/D at Caledon Rd, Aughnacloy	19/11/2008
KP591	192	New foul sewer for H/D at Caledon Rd, Aughnacloy	19/11/2008
KP597	191	Enniskillen New Acute Hospital Foul PM Extension	21/12/2009
KP597	192	Enniskillen New Acute Hospital Foul PM Extension	21/12/2009
KR203	191	Kensington Gardens Flood Relief	27/11/2008
KR309	191	Belvoir Park Trunk Sewer	09/03/2009
KR309	192	Belvoir Park Trunk Sewer	09/03/2009
KR309	193	Belvoir Park Trunk Sewer	09/03/2009
KR310	191	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	09/04/2009
KR310	192	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	09/04/2009
KR310	193	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	09/04/2009
KR310	194	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	09/04/2009
KR310	195	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	09/04/2009
KR310	196	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	09/04/2009
KR310	197	Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works	09/04/2009
KR313	191	Lisbarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	17/08/2007
KR313	192	Lisbarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	17/08/2007
KR313	193	Lisbarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	17/08/2007
KR333	191	Newtownbreda, Dunmurry, New Holland Wastewater Treatment Works - Nutrient Removal	31/01/2008
KR333	192	Newtownbreda, Dunmurry, New Holland Wastewater Treatment Works - Nutrient Removal	31/01/2008
KR341	191	Demesne Road Holywood Foul & Storm Sewer	17/08/2007
KR341	192	Demesne Road Holywood Foul & Storm Sewer	17/08/2007

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KR361	191	Carrowreagh Road Dundonald Storm Sewer	24/03/2009
KR365	191	Springbank Industrial Estate Foul Sewer Ext	17/08/2007
KR375	191	216-228 Belmont Road, Belfast Sewer Rehabilitation	22/09/2008
KR377	191	Glendarragh SPS - Replacement pumping main	10/06/2008
KR382	192	Salinity Removal from Sewerage System discharging to new North Down Wastewater Treatment Works	18/10/2007
KR382	193	Salinity Removal from Sewerage System discharging to new North Down Wastewater Treatment Works	18/10/2007
KR385	192	Ormeau Road Storm Separation	23/10/2008
KR385	193	Ormeau Road Storm Separation	23/10/2008
KR386	192	St Meryl Park / Kennedy Way Sewer Upgrade	01/05/2008
KR387	191	Ballywhiskin Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR387	192	Ballywhiskin Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR387	194	Ballywhiskin Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR388	191	Ballywalter Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	14/01/2008
KR388	192	Ballywalter Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	14/01/2008
KR388	193	Ballywalter Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	14/01/2008
KR388	194	Ballywalter Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	14/01/2008
KR389	191	Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR389	192	Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR389	194	Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR389	195	Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR390	191	Cloughy Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	14/01/2008
KR390	192	Cloughy Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	14/01/2008
KR390	194	Cloughy Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	14/01/2008
KR391	191	Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR391	192	Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008

			Approved Date
KR391	194	Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR391	195	Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	11/03/2008
KR392	192	Burren Way, Cregagh	09/10/2007
KR392	193	Burren Way, Cregagh	09/10/2007
KR393	191	Re-direction of Effluents from Belfast Sludge Incinerator within Belfast Wastewater Treatment Works	31/10/2007
KR393	192	Re-direction of Effluents from Belfast Sludge Incinerator within Belfast Wastewater Treatment Works	31/10/2007
KR396	192	Kylemore Park, Belfast Flood Alleviation	02/07/2008
KR399	191	Ballyholme (Bangor) DAP Phase 1	22/09/2008
KR399	192	Ballyholme (Bangor) DAP Phase 1	22/09/2008
KR399	194	Ballyholme (Bangor) DAP Phase 1	22/09/2008
KR400	191	Lukes Point (Bangor) DAP Phase 1	20/03/2009
KR400	192	Lukes Point (Bangor) DAP Phase 1	20/03/2009
KR401	191	East Belfast Phase 1	03/08/2009
KR401	192	East Belfast Phase 1	03/08/2009
KR402	191	Joymount Carrick DAP Phase 1	26/03/2009
KR402	192	Joymount Carrick DAP Phase 1	26/03/2009
KR403	191	Whitehouse DAP Phase 1	08/01/2009
KR403	192	Whitehouse DAP Phase 1	08/01/2009
KR404	191	Dunmurray DAP Phase 1	22/09/2008
KR404	192	Dunmurray DAP Phase 1	22/09/2008
KR406	191	Carrowdore Wastewater Treatment Works I	26/03/2008
KR406	192	Carrowdore Wastewater Treatment Works I	26/03/2008
KR410	191	629 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast Storm Sewer Extension	11/03/2009
KR411	191	Antrim Road, Mallusk Foul and Storm Sewer Extension	24/03/2009
KR413	191	Grahamsbridge Road, Dundonald, Belfast Storm Sewer Extension.	23/02/2009
KR418	191	Castle Place / High Street Sewer and Water main Upgrade	02/09/2008
KR419	191	Annadale Avenue, Belfast Storm Sewer	10/07/2009
KR420	191	Inglewood Park, Bangor Storm Sewer	11/03/2009
KR421	191	Hillview Road Belfast Storm Sewer Extension	10/07/2009
KR424	191	Green Walk Newtownabbey Storm Sewer Extension	11/03/2009

			Approved Date
KR425	191	Dunmisk Park Belfast Storm Sewer	13/10/2009
KR440	191	Ballywalter DAP Stage 1	09/02/2010
KR440	192	Ballywalter DAP Stage 1	09/02/2010
KR450	191	Fountainville Ave, Belfast, Swer Collapsed.	20/04/2009
KR450	192	Fountainville Ave, Belfast, Swer Collapsed.	20/04/2009
KR452	191	Baroda Street / Ormeau Park, Belfast CSO	14/08/2009
KR452	192	Baroda Street / Ormeau Park, Belfast CSO	14/08/2009
KR453	191	Ellis Street, Carrickfergus, Sewer replacement/ rehabilitation	13/10/2009
KR453	192	Ellis Street, Carrickfergus, Sewer replacement/ rehabilitation	13/10/2009
KS212	191	Portaferry Wastewater Treatment Works	28/06/2007
KS212	192	Portaferry Wastewater Treatment Works	28/06/2007
KS212	193	Portaferry Wastewater Treatment Works	28/06/2007
KS215	191	Annalong Wastewater Treatment Works	18/10/2007
KS263	191	Saintfield Wastewater Treatment Works	28/08/2007
KS263	192	Saintfield Wastewater Treatment Works	28/08/2007
KS263	193	Saintfield Wastewater Treatment Works	28/08/2007
KS273	191	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	04/11/2008
KS273	192	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	04/11/2008
KS273	193	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	04/11/2008
KS273	194	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	04/11/2008
KS273	195	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	04/11/2008
KS273	196	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	04/11/2008
KS273	197	Comber Rd/Portaferry Rd Newtownards Sewage Pumping Station	04/11/2008
KS309	191	Raholp Wastewater Treatment Works	23/08/2007
KS309	192	Raholp Wastewater Treatment Works	23/08/2007
KS309	193	Raholp Wastewater Treatment Works	23/08/2007
KS309	194	Raholp Wastewater Treatment Works	23/08/2007
KS310	191	Clough Wastewater Treatment Works	05/09/2008

			Approved Date
KS310	192	Clough Wastewater Treatment Works	05/09/2008
KS326	191	Commons Road, Ballykinlar Storm Sewer	18/05/2009
KS326	192	Commons Road, Ballykinlar Storm Sewer	18/05/2009
KS328	191	Delinvilla Lane Dundrum Storm Sewer	27/03/2009
KS328	192	Delinvilla Lane Dundrum Storm Sewer	27/03/2009
KS347	191	Crossgar Road, Ballynahinch Storm Sewer	02/09/2009
KS347	192	Crossgar Road, Ballynahinch Storm Sewer	02/09/2009
KS348	191	Shimna Rd, Newcastle, Sewer Replacement	14/08/2009
KS357	191	Sketrick Island, Whiterock Sewerage Facilities	08/08/2007
KS357	192	Sketrick Island, Whiterock Sewerage Facilities	08/08/2007
KS366	191	Upper Greenwall Street Storm Sewer Extension.	27/04/2009
KS369	191	Ballylough Road/Aghlisnafin Road Castlewellan	26/06/2008
KS371	191	Killinchy Street Comber Storm Sewer	10/07/2009
KS373	191	Church Street SPS Upgrade, Downpatrick	16/06/2009
KS376	191	Newcastle Sewer Networks Improvements	09/10/2007
KS377	191	Downs Road/Castle Park Sewer Upgrade/ Attenuation	20/09/2007
KS378	191	Burren River SPS Upgrades & Networks Improvements	23/07/2008
KS379	191	Murlough SPS Upgrade & Network Improvements	21/12/2009
KS381	191	North Road, Newtownards Storm	18/10/2007
KS386	191	Longisland Drive SPS Rising Main (Kircubbin)	09/07/2008
KS386	193	Longisland Drive SPS Rising Main (Kircubbin)	09/07/2008
KS387	191	Manse Road, Seaforde Storm Sewer Extension	27/04/2009
KS804	191	Millisle DAP - Phase 1	15/05/2008
KS804	192	Millisle DAP - Phase 1	15/05/2008
KS804	193	Millisle DAP - Phase 1	15/05/2008
KS806	191	Movilla Road, Newtownards Foul Sewer Extension	21/01/2008
KS807	191	Kilkeel Harbour SPS and Sewerage Improvements	09/07/2009
KS809	191	Carrowdore Sewer Replacement	03/12/2007
KS811	191	Portaferry DAP Phase 1	25/02/2008
KS816	191	Magheraknock Road, Ballynahinch Sewer Replacement	02/07/2008
KS817	191	Saintfield Waste Water Pumping Station, Pumping Main Replacement.	25/02/2009
KS820	191	Upper North St/Mark St, Newtownards Storm Sewer	23/06/2009
KS824	191	Springfield Road, Portavogie Storm Sewer Extension	03/08/2009

			Approved Date
KS827	191	Hamilton Road, Bangor Storm Sewer	08/07/2009
KS828	192	Glen Road, Comber Flood Alleviation	18/05/2009
KS831	191	Dermott Park, Comber Storm Sewer Upgrading	10/07/2009
KS832	191	Gransha Road, Bangor WWPS Refurbishment	03/12/2009
KS836	191	Crawfordsburn Road, Bangor Storm and Foul sewer Extensions	01/02/2010
KS843	191	Stella Maris, Strangford. Sewer Extension	15/09/2009
KS844	191	Ballyhornan Outfall Screen .	16/09/2009
KT098	191	Annahilt Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KT098	192	Annahilt Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KT098	193	Annahilt Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KT098	194	Annahilt Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KT102	191	Dunmurry Wastewater Treatment Works Modifications	09/04/2009
KT102	192	Dunmurry Wastewater Treatment Works Modifications	09/04/2009
KT102	193	Dunmurry Wastewater Treatment Works Modifications	09/04/2009
KT113	191	Ravarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	02/02/2009
KT113	192	Ravarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	02/02/2009
KT113	193	Ravarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	02/02/2009
KT113	194	Ravarnet Wastewater Treatment Works	02/02/2009
KT114	191	Hillsborough Wastewater Treatment Works	02/09/2009
KT114	192	Hillsborough Wastewater Treatment Works	02/09/2009
KT114	193	Hillsborough Wastewater Treatment Works	02/09/2009
KT114	194	Hillsborough Wastewater Treatment Works	02/09/2009
KT123	191	Edenderry Wastewater Treatment Works	20/02/2009
KT123	192	Edenderry Wastewater Treatment Works	20/02/2009
KT123	193	Edenderry Wastewater Treatment Works	20/02/2009
KT123	194	Edenderry Wastewater Treatment Works	20/02/2009
KT124	192	Dromara Wastewater Treatment Works	18/10/2007
KT124	193	Dromara Wastewater Treatment Works	18/10/2007
KT124	194	Dromara Wastewater Treatment Works	18/10/2007
KT125	192	Hook's Corner Wastewater Treatment Works	02/09/2009
KT125	193	Hook's Corner Wastewater Treatment Works	02/09/2009
KT130	191	Mill Turn Dromore SPS Upgrade	09/07/2007
KT134	191	Lower Ballinderry Wastewater Treatment Works	05/06/2008

			Approved Date
KT134	192	Lower Ballinderry Wastewater Treatment Works	05/06/2008
KT134	193	Lower Ballinderry Wastewater Treatment Works	05/06/2008
KT140	191	Hugenot drive Lisburn SPS Upgrade	21/01/2008
KT140	192	Hugenot drive Lisburn SPS Upgrade	21/01/2008
KT140	193	Hugenot drive Lisburn SPS Upgrade	21/01/2008
KT143	191	Pounburn WWTW	17/08/2007
KT143	192	Pounburn WWTW	17/08/2007
KT144	191	The Square, Hillsborough Storm Sewer Ext.	20/11/2007
KT144	192	The Square, Hillsborough Storm Sewer Ext.	20/11/2007
KT373	191	Hulls Lane, Lisburn Foul Sewer Extension	21/11/2007
KT374	191	Scroggy Road Glenavy	19/06/2008
KT375	191	Prince William Road, Lisburn Foul Sewer Extension	17/04/2008
KT375	192	Prince William Road, Lisburn Foul Sewer Extension	17/04/2008
KT377	191	New Holland Wastewater Treatment Works	02/09/2009
KT384	191	Mandeville Avenue, Lisburn Foul Sewer Extension	19/06/2008
KT385	192	Dundrod Drive Lisburn Storm Sewer Upgrade	11/03/2009
KT386	191	Lisburn Road, Culavey Road Hillsborough Storm Sewer	08/07/2009
KT387	191	Trinity Terrace Lisburn Foul & Storm Sewer Extensions	03/03/2009
KT389	191	Magheralave Road Lisburn, Foul Sewer Extension	03/08/2009
KU103	191	Racecourse Hill Downpatrick Foul & Storm Sewer Extension	19/11/2008
KV009	191	Gilford Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KV009	192	Gilford Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KV033	191	Warrenpoint Wastewater Treatment Works	28/06/2007
KV033	192	Warrenpoint Wastewater Treatment Works	28/06/2007
KV033	193	Warrenpoint Wastewater Treatment Works	28/06/2007
KV042	191	Cullaville Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KV042	192	Cullaville Wastewater Treatment Works	08/08/2007
KV064	191	Lurganare Wastewater Treatment Works	14/10/2009
KV067	191	Harmony Heights, Newry Foul Sewer Extension	03/09/2008
KV070	191	Springfield Road Warrenpoint SPS Replacement	13/11/2008
KV072	191	Rooneys Meadow Foul Sewer to Replace SPS	08/08/2007
KV073	191	Windmill Road SPS Replacement Sewer	21/12/2009
KV074	191	Cambrook SPS to Green Road	17/11/2008

			Approved Date
KV079	191	McShanes Road, Bessbrook Foul Sewer Extension	23/01/2008
KV089	191	Dunbar Road Banbridge SPS Upgrade	03/09/2009
KV091	191	Kiln Lane, Banbridge SPS Upgrade	06/08/2009
KV092	191	Bannview Heights, Banbridge SPS Upgrade	02/07/2009
KV093	191	Millstone Close, Moneyslane SPS Upgrade	16/05/2008
KV094	191	Whyte Acres, Banbridge SPS Upgrade	16/11/2009
KV097	191	Belleeks WwTW	27/06/2007
KV108	191	School Road, Newtownhamilton Storm Sewer Wxtension	18/09/2007
KV113	191	Skerriff Road Cullyhanna Foul Sewer Extension	23/06/2008
KV115	191	The Meadows Newry Trunk Relief Sewer	21/05/2007
KV116	191	Abbey Park Kilkeel Sewer Replacement	08/10/2007
KV116	192	Abbey Park Kilkeel Sewer Replacement	08/10/2007
KV122	191	High Street, Gilford Sewer Replacement	22/05/2008
KV127	191	Castle Lane, Castlewellsan Storm Sewer Ext	10/12/2007
KV128	191	Sheetrim Road Cullyhanna Foul Sewer Extension	23/07/2007
KV130	191	Newry Road Mayobridge Storm Foul Sewer Extension	22/07/2008
KV135	191	Bartley Park Kilkeel Sewer Replacements And Watermain Extension	28/10/2009
KV140	191	Rostrevor Road, Hilltown Storm Sewer Extension	01/08/2008
KV141	191	Limekiln Road Newry Foul Sewer Extension	08/08/2007
KV144	192	Dromore Street Rathfriland Storm Sewer Extension	19/09/2007
KV145	191	Charlotte Street/Newry Road Warrenpoint Proposed Sewer Improvements	15/09/2008
KV145	192	Charlotte Street/Newry Road Warrenpoint Proposed Sewer Improvements	15/09/2008
KV146	191	Dunaval SPS Storm Tanks	23/10/2008
KV149	191	Newry WWTW Aeration upgrade	19/08/2008
KV150	191	Forthill Road Newry Foul Sewer Extension	03/09/2009
KV151	191	Carrickdesland, Burren Foul Sewer Extension	07/07/2009
KV152	191	Abbey Grammar School Storm Sewer Extension	05/05/2009
KV155	191	Rostrevor Sewers Upgrading - Horners Lane Improvements	09/02/2009
KV157	191	Rathfriland WWTW Inlet Screens and CSOS	18/05/2009
KV158	191	Manse Road Banbridge Foul & Storm Sewer Extensions	05/06/2009
KV163	191	7 Old Road Drumintee Sewer Pumping Main Extension	02/02/2010
KV164	191	Livins Road, Attical Foul Sewer Extension	10/02/2010

			Approved Date
KX089	191	Strabane Road, Castlederg Storm Sewer	08/02/2008
KX089	192	Strabane Road, Castlederg Storm Sewer	08/02/2008
KX089	193	Strabane Road, Castlederg Storm Sewer	08/02/2008
KX104	191	Old Tempo Road, Enniskillen Storm Sewer	03/12/2009
KX126	191	Glencam Road, Omagh Storm Sewer	07/02/2008
KX126	192	Glencam Road, Omagh Storm Sewer	07/02/2008
KX220	191	Small WWTWs Priority Upgrades	03/06/2009
KX975	191	Greysteel S&F Sewers	12/06/2009

Northern Ireland Water: Staff

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4145/10, how long the four staff who transferred to NI Water from Steria Ltd will be employed under the existing Steria terms and conditions before they are transferred to NI Water's terms and conditions.

(AQW 4685/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that three of the four employees transferred from Steria Limited have retained their former Steria terms and conditions of service relating to pay and allowances, and will continue to do so unless they opt to transfer to NIW terms and conditions. One transferred employee agreed to move to NIW pay and allowances subsequent to their transfer to NIW. All 4 transferring employees moved onto NIW non-pay related terms and conditions of service with effect from their date of transfer on 3 July 2009.

Northern Ireland Water Staff

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4145/10, what process was followed to determine the grading of (i) the two level 3; and (ii) the two level 4 employees who transferred from Steria to NI Water.

(AQW 4686/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the grade equivalent for the four employees transferred from Steria Limited was assessed at two at Level 3 and two at Level 4 based on their salary package at the time of transfer. The post for one of the transferred employees was subsequently evaluated using the NIW job evaluation system and confirmed at Level 4 grade.

Northern Ireland Water: Pay Scales

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4145/10, to detail the current pay scale, plus bonuses, for (i) a Level 2; and (ii) a Level 3 employee within NI Water.

(AQW 4687/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that its staff at Level 2 and Level 3 are not remunerated on the basis of a pay scale, but on individual personal to holder pay points.

The range of basic pay for Level 2 staff runs from £70,000 to £108,000 per annum. There is no bonus arrangement currently in place for Level 2 staff for 2009/10.

The range of basic pay for Level 3 staff runs from £48,000 to £65,000 per annum. A discretionary bonus scheme operates for Level 3 staff which provides for a bonus of up to 10 percent of salary based upon the achievement of personal targets and corporate key performance indicators.

Northern Ireland Water: Pay Scales

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4145/10, to detail the current pay scale of (i) the two level 3; and (ii) the two level 4 employees who transferred from Steria to NI Water.

(AQW 4688/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that one of the four employees transferred from Steria Limited is paid on the NIW Level 4 pay scale which currently runs from £35,314 to £43,161. The remaining three transferred employees were not placed on a NIW pay scale but on individual personal to holder pay points. NIW is unable to disclose details of their individual salaries under the terms of the Data Protection Act.1998.

Northern Ireland Water: Staff

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4145/10, what terms and conditions will apply to the four employees who transferred from Steria to NI Water, including entitlement to (i) paid holidays; (ii) sick pay; (iii) pension; and (iv) redundancy; and on what date will these terms and conditions become applicable.

(AQW 4689/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that when the four employees transferred from Steria Limited on 3 July 2009, they retained their former Steria pay-related terms and conditions but transferred to NIW terms and conditions of service in all other areas including paid holidays; sick pay; pension; and redundancy. Subsequently one of the transferred employees agreed to move to NIW pay and allowances terms.

Residents' Parking Scheme in the Lower Lisburn Road and Lower Malone Road

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider a trial residents parking scheme in the Lower Lisburn Road and Lower Malone Road areas, given the local support for a scheme, and irrespective of the negative outcome of similar schemes in other areas.

(AQW 4701/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have reviewed the responses received from the most recent consultation exercise carried out by my Department's Roads Service, regarding proposals for Residents' Parking Schemes in a number of areas of Belfast. I have considered the options available, which would allow the implementation of successful schemes, and have asked Roads Service to discuss the way forward with local representatives.

With regard to the implementation of a Residents' Parking Scheme in the Lower Lisburn Road and Malone Road areas, I can advise the Member that I have asked Roads Service to engage with residents from Malone Avenue, Eglantine Avenue, Wellington Park and Wellesley Avenue, with a view to implementing such a scheme in that area.

It is anticipated that the first substantive discussions on this issue will take place with the local residents' association during March 2010.

20 mph Speed Limit

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the 20mph speed limit introduced in the Holyland area of South Belfast, including the cost of the scheme.

(AQW 4702/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the 20mph speed limit in the Holyland area of South Belfast is just one of the measures, in an area-wide traffic calming scheme. Other measures in the area include kerbed build-outs, road humps and raised junctions.

I understand that these measures, coupled with high levels of on-street parking, have been effective in reducing vehicle speeds and improving driver behaviour in the area.

This scheme was implemented in the mid to late 1990's and unfortunately details regarding the cost of the scheme are no longer available.

Dual Carriageway Below the Larne Road Roundabout in Ballymena

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the work being carried out to provide a dual carriageway below the Larne Road roundabout in Ballymena.

(AQW 4705/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that construction of the dual carriageway underneath the Larne Road Roundabout, connecting the Ballee Road East dual carriageway to the southern end of the M2 Ballymena Bypass, has been delayed. This was caused firstly by a significant archaeological find, and secondly, by poor weather encountered over the winter period. Roads Service expects that once the weather improves, the contractor will be able to complete the earthworks and construction will continue.

It is anticipated that the road will be open for traffic in June 2010.

Stones Thrown at Buses

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development how many recorded incidents there were of when stones were thrown at buses, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4716/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I am informed by Translink that the total numbers of recorded incidents involving its buses were as follows:

Financial Year	Incidents
2005/06	1008
2006/07	610
2007/08	567
2008/09	523
2009/10 to date	416

My Department does not hold information about incidents involving other buses.

Escape Ladders on Northern Ireland Railway Trains

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is considering making alterations to the design of the escape ladders on NI Railway trains to aid passengers with disabilities or passengers who are mobility impaired.

(AQW 4721/10)

Minister for Regional Development: No. Translink has advised that the emergency ladders in use on trains are of an industry standard, designed for on-train storage and easy deployment. They are not designed for use by disabled or mobility impaired passengers. Their use has been approved by my Department as Safety Authority for the railways here.

In the event of such passengers requiring to disembark from a train other than at a recognised halt or station, where circumstances allow, NIR staff and members of the Emergency Services will help passengers with disabilities or who are mobility impaired to disembark safely. Any specific needs these passengers have will be taken into consideration alongside the urgency of the situation and any risks

associated with the need to detain. According to NI Railways the occurrence of incidents requiring passengers to disembark other than at recognised halts or stations, is very rare.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans NI Water has for water and sewerage infrastructure in the Strangford constituency in the 2010/11 financial year.

(AQW 4746/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently reviewing its capital investment plans following the final determination of its business plan proposals for the three years ending 31 March 2013 by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation.

It is therefore not in a position at this time to provide final details of plans for water and sewerage projects in the Strangford constituency, but an investment of around £8 million is anticipated during 2010/11. This investment will include the continuation of projects such as Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works and Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works and the commencement of new projects such as Millisle Drainage Area Plan, Wastewater Pumping Station refurbishment, South Street, Newtownards, and Ballywalter Drainage Area Plan.

Portaferry to Strangford Ferry

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many passengers travelled on the Portaferry to Strangford ferry; (ii) how many times there was a breakdown in this service; and (iii) what the annual subsidy was for the running of this service, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4752/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the number of passengers who travelled on the Portaferry to Strangford ferry in the last five years is shown in the table below:

Year	Number of passengers (both directions)
2005*	448,371
2006	682,310
2007	670,688
2008	685,369
2009	675,411

* The figures for 2005 are for May to December only

The number of breakdowns in service in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Breakdowns	2	4	4	12	6

With regard to subsidies, Roads Service has further advised that the total costs (operating & notional) and income received from ticket sales for the Strangford ferry service, for each of the last five years is shown in the table below:

Financial Year	Total Costs (Operating & Notional)	Income from Ticket Sales
2004/5	£1,529,896	£898,155

Financial Year	Total Costs (Operating & Notional)	Income from Ticket Sales
2005/6	£1,549,920	£910,715
2006/7	£1,783,498	£1,016,727
2007/8	£1,817,737	£1,027,780
2008/9	£1,924,742	£969,087

MV Strangford Ferry

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the lifespan of the MV Strangford ferry; and if he has any plans to obtain a replacement vessel.

(AQW 4753/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the MV Strangford was built in 1969, and continues to be seaworthy. All vessels are examined by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and cleared by them for service. A Marine consultant examined the vessel in 2008 and concluded that the vessel was well maintained, and in their view was in an above average condition, for a ship of her age.

The Department keeps the need to replace the MV Strangford under regular review. In addition, the Department has partnered with Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd from Scotland, and the Department of Rural, Community and Gaeltacht Affairs, in the South, to develop a common design and procurement strategy for small ferries. The partnership is called the 'Small Ferries Project' and it may provide a mechanism for Roads Service to procure a replacement vessel, subject to the preparation of a business case, and the availability of resources.

Financial Assistance to Ferry Services

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the financial assistance his Department provided to (i) the Strangford ferry service; (ii) the Rathlin Island ferry service; and (iii) the Foyle ferry service, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4766/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Under Article 99 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993, my Department operates the Strangford ferry service and secures the provision of the Rathlin ferry service. The Lough Foyle ferry service, operating between Magilligan and Greencastle, does not fall within the ambit of this legislation and does not receive financial assistance from my Department.

As regards the Strangford ferry service, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the total costs (operating and notional) and income received from ticket sales for each of the last three years are as shown in the table below:

Strangford ferry service	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
Total Costs (Operating & Notional)	£1,783,498	£1,817,737	£1,924,742
Income from Ticket Sales	£1,016,727	£1,027,780	£969,087

As regards the Rathlin Island ferry service, the financial assistance provided is set out in the table below. The figures include the cost of fares discounts.

Rathlin Island ferry service	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
	£456,677	£471,601	£588,224

The figures in the tables above do not include any capital investment by my Department.

Coleraine to Londonderry Railway

Mr G Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the change in the number of passengers using the Coleraine to Londonderry railway in each year between 1999 and 2009.

(AQW 4780/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have provided the following information which details the changes in passenger numbers travelling on all or part of the line section Coleraine to Londonderry.

2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
156,637	215,259	223,914	249,187	264,934	279,904

Note 1 – Translink do not have statistics prior to 2003/04, when the Merit reporting system was introduced.

Note 2 – These statistics relate to ticket types reported on Merit but exclude Commuter Travelcards and School Passes.

A26 between Glarryford and Coleraine

Mr G Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average number of cars, per day, using the A26 between Glarryford and Coleraine in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4781/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has three automatic traffic counting sites located on the A26 between Glarryford and Coleraine.

Details of the average annual daily two-way traffic flow information, recorded at these sites, over the last five years, are provided in the table below:

Location	Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT)				
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
A26 between Coleraine and Ballymoney	15,600	17,228	17,468	16,242	16,209
A26 by-passing Ballymoney	15,480	17,066	17,525	16,810	17,642
A26 between Ballymoney and Glarryford	12,740	13,699	14,698	13,388	13,465

Ulsterbus Workforce

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what proportion of the current Ulsterbus workforce are (i) Protestant; (ii) Catholic; and (iii) other.

(AQW 4799/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised that as at 17 February 2010 the breakdown of religious affiliation of Ulsterbus staff is as follows:-

- (i) Protestant 55%
- (ii) Catholic 42%
- (iii) Other 3%

Portaferry to Strangford Ferry

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development if the Euro is accepted on the Portaferry to Strangford ferry.

(AQW 4814/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the current arrangements on the Strangford ferry allow for the acceptance of Euros. However, as ticketing transactions using Euros are time consuming, Roads Service encourages passengers to pay in Sterling.

Portaferry to Strangford Ferry

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development if the back-up vessel for the Portaferry to Strangford ferry route, which carries foot passengers only, is in full working order in the event that it should be needed.

(AQW 4815/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the passenger only vessel, the MV Rachlyn, is in full working order and is available, if required, for use on the Portaferry to Strangford route.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans NI Water has for water and sewerage infrastructure in the East Antrim constituency in the 2010/11 financial year.

(AQW 4820/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently reviewing its capital investment plans following the final determination of its business plan proposals for the three years ending 31 March 2013 by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation.

It is therefore not in a position at this time to provide final details of plans for water and sewerage projects in the East Antrim constituency, but an investment of around £9 million is anticipated during 2010/11. This investment will include the continuation of projects such as Whitehead, Ballycarry and Ballystrudder Wastewater Treatment Rationalisation and Whiteabbey Lower Watermains Replacement and the commencement of new projects such as sewerage infrastructure work at Larne Road, Carrickfergus and Glenavna Manor, Newtownabbey.

Water Meters

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4429/10, (i) how many non-domestic properties cannot have water meters fitted; and (ii) what percentage of the overall total does this represent.

(AQW 4835/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the data available indicates that there are 6,229 non-domestic properties where it may not be possible to fit a meter. This represents 5 percent of all non-domestic properties.

Public Relations Services

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on public relations services provided by Weber Shandwick since May 2007.

(AQW 4926/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Nothing has been spent by my Department on public relations services provided by Weber Shandwick since May 2007.

Monthly Rail Ticket

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development why students cannot purchase a reduced monthly rail ticket at the same discounted rate as a weekly ticket.

(AQW 4959/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink offers discounts to students travelling at its own discretion. This is a commercial decision for Translink in the context of its overall financial position.

However, discounted travel is available on selected ticket types most frequently used by students e.g. the weekly rail ticket. The monthly rail ticket already offers a significant saving/reduction on single tickets and is of course available to students.

In addition, students aged 16 to 21 years old who travel regularly by rail with a 16 to 21 rail discount card can save 20% on the cost of weekly and monthly tickets.

Ard na Ghleanna in the Glen Road Area of West Belfast

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his intentions in relation to the development of the land-zone known as Ard na Ghleanna in the Glen Road area of west Belfast.
(AQW 4998/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I am aware there are a number of master plans, proposals and initiatives for developments in West Belfast which includes the Ard na Ghleanna site. These are at different stages of development and are being led by a number of Departments and Lead Organisations.

As the regeneration of this area is cross-cutting my intention is to bring forward a Paper to the Executive seeking endorsement to an Executive led approach to the regeneration of West Belfast, including the Shankill Road.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what percentage of requests for the Door-to-Door service have been accepted in the Lisburn area.
(AQW 5102/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Door-to-Door transport has been operating in the Lisburn area (which includes Dunmurry) since May 2007 and only combined statistical data is available for the 2007/08 financial year.

However I can confirm in the Lisburn area 99 percent of journey requests were accepted during the year April 2008- March 2009 and 99 percent accepted in the period April 2009 – January 2010.

Department for Social Development

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy for the Kilcooley Estate

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the next stage of the neighbourhood renewal strategy for the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.
(AQW 4468/10)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The neighbourhood renewal strategy in Kilcooley is being progressed in line with the Kilcooley Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership's Vision Framework and 3 year rolling action plan for the regeneration of the estate. To date DSD funding of over £1,663,504 has been allocated to a range of projects emanating from the action plan with additional funding of £765,509 levered from other sources. The Partnership is due to carry out its annual Action Plan review and project prioritisation exercise, which will determine its priorities for the next financial year and beyond, later this month.

Assistance for 16-17 Year Olds

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what assistance her Department provides for 16-17 year olds who live independently and are in poverty.

(AQW 4580/10)

Minister for Social Development: Housing Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance are income-related benefit intended to help people on low incomes. Depending on their circumstances, persons aged 16 to 17 years old who live independently may qualify for these benefits. In certain circumstances people in this age group may also qualify for Income Support.

Flats at Rathgill Park, Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the plan and time-scale for the removal of the flats at Rathgill Park, Bangor.

(AQW 4588/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are no proposals to remove flats at Rathgill Park. The Housing Executive has proposals for multi-element improvement works to the blocks of flats at Rathgill Park, numbers 21-27 but cannot confirm when this may commence. The Housing Executive is unable to confirm details of its programmes beyond 2009/10. It will review its programmes of activity when budgets have been confirmed, as the delivery of these is dependent on the availability of funding in any given year.

Urban Regeneration

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how much her Department invested in urban regeneration in (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; and (iii) 2009; and to detail the amounts given to specific towns and cities in each of these three years.

(AQW 4603/10)

Minister for Social Development: The figures requested are as follows –

TABLE 1. URBAN REGENERATION SPEND FROM 2007 TO 2009

	2006/07 £m	2007/08 £m	2008/09 £m
Belfast	25.1	32.3	29.0
North West	7.9	9.8	13.9
Regional Cities & Towns	8.2	28.2	22.3
Total	41.2	70.3	65.2

Urban regeneration expenditure is not recorded by towns and cities. The above information identifies expenditure across the three main development areas.

Notes:

1. Figures include; Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund capital and revenue expenditure, expenditure from physical regeneration programmes (Urban Development Grants, Comprehensive Development, Environmental Improvement Schemes, Public Realm, Ilex and Laganside)
2. The above figures do not include expenditure and recoverable monies from Comprehensive Development schemes which have now transferred to the developer such as Victoria Square as the costs incurred by the Department are recouped from the developer representing a nil cost to Government.

Bonfires: Clean-up

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of the clean-up of bonfires on Housing Executive owned property in the Antrim Borough Council area in each of the last five years.
(AQW 4615/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the costs incurred in relation to the clean-up of bonfires on Housing Executive owned property in the Antrim Borough Council area in each of the last 5 years:-

2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
£9,021.50	£7,185.00	£18,119.35	£8,808.99	£3,871.00

Economy 7 Heating Systems

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties had Economy 7 systems in (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; and (iii) 2009; and whether her Department intends to replace these with more energy efficient systems.
(AQW 4628/10)

Minister for Social Development: The number of Housing Executive dwellings with Economy7 heating in each of the years in question was as follows:-

- As at 31 March 2007 12874
- As at 31 March 2008 12270
- As at 31 March 2009 11977

The Housing Executive has been replacing Economy 7 heating where gas or oil is a technically practical option and has reduced the number of homes heated by Economy 7 from a peak of 26,000 to the current level of 11,085 dwellings. The Housing Executive has provisionally planned to replace a further 624 Economy 7 heating systems in 2010/11, although this will be dependent on the availability of funding.

New Housing and Housing Repairs

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Social Development the total amount spent by her Department on (i) new housing; and (ii) housing repairs, in each constituency in each of the last three years.
(AQW 4631/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not collate all information by parliamentary constituency. In relation to (i) the information in Table 1 below details the Housing Association Grant expenditure through the Social Housing Development Programme by parliamentary constituency in each of the last three years. In relation to (ii) Table 2 below details Housing Executive expenditure on housing repairs through its Response Maintenance Programme by Housing Executive District Office.

TABLE 1 - HOUSING ASSOCIATION GRANT EXPENDITURE *

Parliamentary Constituency	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
East Antrim	676,439	723,424	2,515,909
North Antrim	0	494,863	1,020,980
South Antrim	3,830,594	2,168,973	622,994
Upper Bann	340,291	3,442,276	6,759,026

Parliamentary Constituency	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
East Belfast	10,994,410	30,829,303	9,405,242
North Belfast	15,137,166	35,023,337	32,691,085
South Belfast	9,440,413	15,223,513	1,491,309
West Belfast	10,064,181	31,523,595	2,346,562
North Down	9,015,390	10,576,451	9,945,132
South Down	654,812	3,687,480	3,906,796
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	7,066,513	7,955,105	910,785
Foyle	12,863,379	19,212,536	16,417,155
Lagan Valley	7,516,839	17,627,065	9,139,418
East Londonderry	444,632	1,959,484	155,928
Mid Ulster	132,334	690,272	139,712
Newry & Armagh	4,685,461	8,691,171	9,670,752
Strangford	5,097,730	15,919,204	8,394,893
West Tyrone	711,346	4,390,969	2,381,214

* This information is based on housing starts which include new build, off-the-shelf purchases and existing satisfactory purchases.

TABLE 2 - HOUSING EXECUTIVE RESPONSE MAINTENANCE EXPENDITURE

District Office	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Belfast District 1	£674,944.82	£472,986.78	£780,455.35
Belfast District 2	£1,338,220.80	£1,038,124.71	£1,394,987.74
Belfast District 3	£1,742,194.62	£854,502.58	£1,173,392.84
Belfast District 7	£1,627,474.66	£1,316,070.55	£1,866,757.92
Belfast District 4	£1,268,428.58	£1,418,681.30	£1,645,715.05
Belfast District 5	£2,085,191.74	£1,887,539.69	£2,390,275.87
Belfast District 6	£1,200,739.18	£1,007,195.98	£1,371,675.29
Bangor	£1,158,095.44	£939,171.25	£1,067,716.63
Newtownards	£1,313,339.82	£1,388,004.92	£1,739,846.07
Castlereagh	£1,096,712.07	£1,291,927.24	£1,620,789.70
Lisburn Antrim St	£1,237,019.83	£1,271,805.70	£1,655,258.26
Dairy Farm	£654,398.38	£638,737.51	£662,267.10
Downpatrick	£1,125,997.90	£1,285,419.75	£1,703,493.61
Banbridge	£494,309.36	£434,982.18	£644,386.81
Newry	£1,050,436.49	£777,030.02	£1,052,356.25
Armagh	£657,716.31	£533,073.16	£710,739.90

District Office	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Lurgan/Brownlow	£1,422,670.00	£1,171,418.58	£1,431,213.38
Portadown	£671,857.75	£541,538.01	£760,890.00
Dungannon	£826,456.28	£650,104.93	£794,113.45
Fermanagh	£863,132.87	£772,099.09	£1,010,710.49
Ballymena	£1,376,622.00	£1,357,293.66	£1,683,490.37
Antrim	£1,007,129.29	£871,330.62	£1,195,497.79
Newtownabbey 1	£840,509.70	£677,065.83	£887,717.46
Newtownabbey 2	£661,528.39	£618,081.45	£788,853.86
Carrickfergus	£669,168.49	£504,130.39	£725,431.13
Larne	£444,280.94	£433,677.73	£478,238.42
Ballycastle	£301,579.89	£308,145.23	£355,897.47
Ballymoney	£546,358.62	£520,413.91	£725,972.60
Coleraine	£1,404,361.24	£1,475,236.12	£1,636,191.10
Waterloo	£855,106.34	£752,394.72	£896,054.34
Waterside	£892,447.56	£894,812.57	£1,216,956.83
Collon Terrace	£1,149,238.10	£1,052,326.90	£1,300,094.75
Limavady	£514,257.66	£424,304.71	£629,801.11
Magherafelt	£371,637.86	£324,670.26	£474,149.60
Strabane	£1,008,610.49	£988,225.34	£1,234,621.75
Omagh	£832,328.41	£859,891.52	£951,573.20
Cookstown	£354,736.26	£353,766.24	£476,166.96

Income Support

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how the weekly payments of Income Support of £50.95 for people aged 16-24, and £64.30 for aged 25 or over, are calculated; and (ii) how much is allowed in each calculation for (a) food; (b) energy bills; (c) clothing; and (d) the other component parts which make up the totals.

(AQW 4666/10)

Minister for Social Development: Income Support rates are not set on the basis of a “basket of goods”. They do not include separate amounts for specific items of expenditure such as food, clothing or fuel charges. It is the view that recipients of benefit should be free to spend their benefit as they think best, in the light of their individual circumstances and preferences, rather than have set patterns of expenditure imposed upon them.

The current Income Support rates are not the result of any single calculation or historic set of rules. The weekly allowances were developed by first looking at how well, or poorly, previous schemes such as Supplementary Benefit directed help to those most in need.

The lower levels of Income Support personal allowances for younger, single people take account of the fact that the majority of this group live in someone else’s household and can reasonably be assumed

to have fewer financial responsibilities than those who are older and more likely to live independently. The rates also reflect the lower earnings expectations of younger people.

Benefit Overpayment Debts

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the value of the ten current largest individual benefit overpayment debts currently owed to her Department; (ii) the sum total of these ten debts; (iii) whether each individual case occurred as a result of error or fraud; (iv) whether any of the overpayments which occurred by fraud resulted in successful prosecutions against claimants; and (v) what sanctions were imposed.

(AQW 4667/10)

Minister for Social Development:

- (i) The value of the ten largest individual benefit overpayment debts currently owed to my Department are:
- £97,686.74
 - £94,103.56
 - £83,487.71
 - £81,438.43
 - £76,954.93
 - £74,648.81
 - £71,689.07
 - £71,099.94
 - £68,651.63
 - £67,196.81
- (ii) The sum total of these ten debts is £786,957.63.
- (iii) One overpayment is classified as customer fraud; the others are classified as due to customer error.
- (iv) One case resulted in a successful prosecution. One case is listed for hearing in the Crown Court and legal proceedings are being considered for two more cases. The overpayment classification for the three cases pending legal proceedings may be reclassified to fraud.
- (v) In the case successfully prosecuted the customer received a sentence of 9 months custodial and 12 months probation to run consecutively. A Confiscation Order was also awarded. The Agency is actively seeking recovery of all of the above amounts as appropriate.

Benefit Overpayment Debts

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development how many benefits overpayment debtors owe;

(i) £1 to £10,000; (ii) £10,001 to £20,000; (iii) £20,001 to £30,000; (iv) £30,001 to £40,000; (v) £40,001 to £50,000; and (v) more than £50,001.

(AQW 4668/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below sets out the number of debtors who owe money in respect of social security and housing benefit overpayments. Where an individual debtor has multiple debts these are included in a range of bands.

Value of Overpayments	Number of debtors
£1 to £10,000	103,194
£10,001 to £20,000	1,351

Value of Overpayments	Number of debtors
£20,001 to £30,000	333
£30,001 to £40,000	128
£40,001 to 50,000	48
More than £50,001	55

Fuel Poverty and Strategic Energy Framework

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment concerning fuel poverty and the Strategic Energy Framework. **(AQO 741/10)**

Minister for Social Development: Fuel poverty is affected by three factors: incomes, energy prices and energy efficiency. It is an issue that cuts across a number of government departments and to date, improving energy efficiency has been at the heart of Government's Fuel Poverty Strategy in Northern Ireland.

Prior to the publication of the Strategic Energy Framework, Minister Foster circulated an Executive paper to Ministerial colleagues to which I responded. In addition, my officials have been working closely with colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment through the Inter Departmental Group on Fuel Poverty and the Sustainable Energy Inter Departmental Working Group. Also, as part of the Review of the Fuel Poverty Strategy, my officials met with colleagues in Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I believe it is crucial that departments continue to work together to tackle fuel poverty. This approach will be reflected in the new fuel poverty strategy.

Housing Budget

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development why, in the last monitoring round, she did not bid to have unspent funds from the Royal Exchange development redirected to meet the shortfall in the housing budget. **(AQO 743/10)**

Minister for Social Development: As part of the September Monitoring round I sought to advance £70 million of the £110 million funding relating to the Royal Exchange Project currently held in the 2010-11 baseline – a proposal your party supported. At this stage the funding is not therefore “unspent” as it sits in next year's budget. However, despite the boost my proposal would have given the capital budget in 2009-10, this was not accepted by the Department of Finance and Personnel; I wrote to the Finance Minister expressing my disappointment at this at the end of September. Since the proposal to advance these monies was rejected in the September Monitoring round, there was no point in re-submitting it in the December round. The Royal Exchange budget still sits in next year's budget line and the Department will be making appropriate bids to utilise the budget to best effect in 2010-11.

Shared Future

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on her work in relation to building a shared future. **(AQO 744/10)**

Minister for Social Development: The adverse social and economic consequences of our divided society are well recognised. The progression of the Shared Future agenda is therefore necessary if we are to build a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland.

Within my own Department I have taken steps to ensure that Shared Future objectives are an integral part of many of my policies and programmes. These include the delivery of shared housing and the

provision of shared spaces in our masterplans and public realm schemes, working to address the problems at interface areas and encouraging cross community work in disadvantaged communities.

However, this work alone cannot possibly end the sectarianism that has blighted our communities for the past thirty years or enable us to tackle newer divisions such as that of race or cultural background. To have any hope of success we need strong political leadership and an agreed programme of action by government.

I intend to bring proposals to the Executive in the near future, based among other things, on the ideas and suggestions generated at my public meetings. I hope that these proposals will be received positively by my Executive colleagues.

Shared Future must be at the heart of government policies and therefore is a priority for the whole Executive.

Community Convention and Development Company

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development if she will continue to provide funding for the Community Convention and Development Company.

(AQO 745/10)

Minister for Social Development: Funding for Community Convention and Development Company was awarded to support community development and build capacity specifically within disadvantaged Protestant communities. This work was commenced in 2005 under direct rule partly in response to problems arising from intra-community feuding. The target communities were often blighted by the lack of cohesion and low capacity often resulting from the domination of competing paramilitary organisations. Given the progress made through a variety of measures in building capacity and reducing paramilitary influences in these communities, I do not anticipate renewing funding beyond the current contract which is due to end on 31st May 2010.

Social Housing

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister for Social Development how many units have been completed to date in this financial year under the Department's social housing programme.

(AQO 746/10)

Minister for Social Development: This year we will start 1750 new homes, our highest number for over a decade. As of 31 January, work has already started on 710 of these homes with the remainder programmed and on course to start before the end of the financial year.

As far as completions are concerned, 1136 new homes have been completed so far this year. Some of these properties were started in previous years given the length of time involved in any construction project.

The bottom line is that whether we talk about starts or completions, more new homes are now being made available to those in greatest need and I am pleased that despite the very challenging budgetary constraints I face, I have still been able to deliver this key promise from my New Housing Agenda, working something of an economic miracle to help those in housing stress.

Commission on the Future for Housing in Northern Ireland

Dr S Farry asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the report by the Commission on the Future of Housing in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 748/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Commission on the Future for Housing in Northern Ireland launched a key issues paper for consultation from 5 November 2009 until 31 December 2009. I welcome this paper, particularly in terms of the debate it will generate on issues relating to the long term development of housing in Northern Ireland and I will consider the Commission's report when it is published.

Disability Living Allowance: Green Paper

Mr D McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development what implications the Government green paper on Disability Living Allowance might have on those who are currently in receipt of this benefit.
(AQW 4709/10)

Minister for Social Development: I assume the Member is referring to the Department of Health's Green Paper, Shaping the Future of Care Together, on the reform of adult care and support in England. The Green Paper sets out the case for bringing some disability benefits and the adult social care system together into a single system. However, I understand the proposals do not envisage bringing disability living allowance for those under the age of 65 into the new single system. In line with the long-standing policy of parity in social security matters between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, I anticipate that any changes arising from the Green Paper that involve disability benefits in Great Britain would have implications for the benefits system in Northern Ireland.

Eviction Notices

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many eviction notices were issued by the Housing Executive in each constituency which did not result in the eviction of tenants, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 4726/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below details the information requested by Housing Executive District Office area.

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
East Belfast	23	20	5
West Belfast	8	9	8
North Belfast	24	31	37
Shankill	11	30	14
South Belfast	30	20	10
Bangor	0	1	9
Newtownards	38	46	7
Castlereagh	12	21	12
Lisburn	20	47	24
Dairy Farm	29	31	35
Downpatrick	0	7	0
Banbridge	1	0	0
Newry	8	0	0
Armagh	6	2	2
Lurgan	5	2	0
Portadown	6	0	0
Dungannon	3	1	0
Fermanagh	3	2	1
Ballymena	29	16	2

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Antrim	0	11	13
N'abbey 1	0	0	2
N'abbey 2	0	2	7
Carrickfergus	6	0	0
Larne	2	5	0
Ballycastle	0	0	2
Ballymoney	16	0	0
Coleraine	0	3	1
Waterloo Place	1	1	1
Waterside	8	6	0
Collon Terrace	6	7	1
Limavady	1	0	1
Magherafelt	1	6	1
Strabane	1	1	1
Omagh	3	6	5
Cookstown	0	0	2

Emergency Accommodation for Care Leavers

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the emergency accommodation her Department provides for 16 and 17 year old care leavers; and to detail the waiting lists for each of these facilities.

(AQW 4731/10)

Minister for Social Development: The tables below detail the schemes jointly commissioned and operated by the Housing Executive and the respective Health and Social Care Trusts for 16-17 year old care leavers under the Supporting People programme. Table 1 details the range of Floating Support Services across five areas that provide housing support to care leavers living in the community to help them maintain their tenancies. Table 2 details the 41 jointly commissioned Accommodation Based units that are funded by the Supporting People Programme. There are an additional 30 units funded by Health Trusts bringing the total number of beds through the joint commissioning process to 71.

Details of the waiting lists are not available as access to these schemes is primarily determined by the Health and Social Care Trusts who hold the relevant waiting list information.

TABLE 1 - FLOATING SUPPORT SERVICES FOR CARE LEAVERS

Provider Name	Scheme Name	NIHE Area	Trust
Belfast Central Mission	The LITE Project Dungannon	Southern	Southern Health and Social Care Trust
Belfast Central Mission	The LITE Project Newtownards	South Eastern	South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	Aftercare FS	Belfast	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Provider Name	Scheme Name	NIHE Area	Trust
Mulholland After Care Services	MACS Floating Support Scheme	South Eastern	South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
Action for Children	NCH Floating Support Service	Western	Western Health and Social Care Trust
Western Health and Social Care Trust	Peripatetic Tenancy Support Scheme	Western	Western Health and Social Care Trust
Triangle HA	Children Leaving Care	Western	Western Health and Social Care Trust

TABLE 2 - JOINTLY COMMISSIONED ACCOMMODATION BASED SERVICES FOR CARE LEAVERS

Provider Name	Scheme Name	NIHE Area	Trust	2009/10 Units
Barnardos	Grove Road	Northern	Northern Health and Social Care Trust	3
Barnardos	28 Hightown Road	Northern	Northern Health and Social Care Trust	1
Barnardos	Leaving Care Service - Belfast	Belfast	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	10
Belfast Central Mission	Grampian Avenue	Belfast	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	5
Belfast Central Mission	Thomas Street, Dungannon	Southern	Southern Health and Social Care Trust	2
Belfast Central Mission	James / Crosby Street	South Eastern	South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	2
FHASS	Francis Street, Derry	Western	Western Health and Social Care Trust	8
Mulholland After Care Services	Supported Housing Care Leavers Service	Belfast	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	6
Praxis Care Group	Rockmills/ Northlands	Western	Western Health and Social Care Trust	4
			Total Units	41

Housing Executive Maintenance Programmes

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to list the Housing Executive maintenance programmes scheduled for (i) Newtownards; and (ii) Downpatrick district office areas in the 2010/11 financial year.

(AQW 4747/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has provisionally planned the following schemes in Newtownards and Downpatrick District Office areas:-

- External Cyclical Maintenance – Ards town: 214 dwellings
- Heating Scheme – Annsboro/Ardglass/Killough: 72 dwellings
- Revenue Replacement – Ballynahinch/Downpatrick/Killyleagh kitchens: 154 dwellings

However, these schemes are dependent on the availability of funding and the Housing Executive will review its programmes of activity when budgets for 2010/11 and beyond have been confirmed.

Reform of Disability Benefits

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any consultations between her Department and the Department of Work and Pensions regarding the planned reform of disability benefits.

(AQW 4748/10)

Minister for Social Development: Proposals for bringing some disability benefits and the adult social care system together into a single system are set out in the Department of Health's Green Paper, Shaping the Future of Care Together, on the reform of adult care and support in England. In relation to these proposals, my officials are participating in a working group with the Department for Work and Pensions, HM Treasury and the Department of Health regarding any possible changes to the benefit system arising from the Green Paper. My Department consulted locally on the implications of the proposals for the benefits system and the responses were shared with the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions to help inform the decision-making process.

My officials are also working with the Department for Work and Pensions regarding plans to extend access to the higher rate mobility component of disability living allowance to people with severe sight impairment and, subject to Executive approval, I intend to bring legislation before the Assembly on this matter.

Village Area of South Belfast: Inquiry into the Redevelopment

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development why the transcript of the inquiry into the redevelopment of the Village area of south Belfast has not been made available to the Blackstaff Community Development Association and the Blackstaff Homeowners' Association.

(AQW 4755/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Department gave no commitment to release the transcript from the recent public enquiry into the "Village". The document itself is exempt from disclosure under section 32(2)(b) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development if she sought planning permission to block up houses in the Village area of south Belfast.

(AQW 4756/10)

Minister for Social Development: Planning permission is not required to block up a vacant property. Vacant properties are blocked up to prevent vandalism and the theft of materials, or on Health and Safety grounds.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses in the redevelopment area of the Village, south Belfast, currently have outside toilets.

(AQW 4757/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive is not aware of any occupied properties in the redevelopment area of the Village which have outside toilets.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses in the redevelopment area of the Village, south Belfast, were surveyed internally.

(AQW 4758/10)

Minister for Social Development: Over 27% of occupied dwellings (20% of all dwellings were blocked up or vacant) within the Urban Renewal Area were surveyed internally. In numerical terms, 286 out of 1033 occupied dwellings were internally surveyed, including 82 within the boundary of the area now agreed for redevelopment.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development (i) if it is standard practice for the agents carrying out the survey under the Warm Homes Scheme to photograph every room in the house; (ii) if it is a requirement that the home owner accompanies the agent while the photographs are being taken; and (iii) if not, whether she will make this a requirement.

(AQW 4773/10)

Minister for Social Development: It is not standard practice to photograph every room in a house when surveying a property in relation to the Warm Homes Scheme. However, in collecting data for the purposes of carrying out energy performance assessments, which are a requirement under the scheme, it is necessary to take certain photographs of the interior and exterior of the properties to provide photographic evidence in support of the energy performance calculation.

Photographic evidence is a requirement of the relevant Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) accreditation bodies. The production of these photographs can be requested in the event of periodic audits of the energy assessor's work. Typically photographs will be taken of the heating boiler, fire, radiator thermostats, electric meter, room thermostats, hot water cylinder and roof space insulation.

There is no requirement that the home owner accompanies the surveyor. That would be left to the discretion of the home owner.

Boiler Scrappage Scheme

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development when the public consultation on the introduction of the Boiler Scrappage Scheme, as part of the Fuel Poverty Strategy, will be rolled out; and what consideration she has given to the qualifying criteria for such a scheme.

(AQW 4774/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Department is currently working on a review of the Fuel Poverty Strategy and one of the areas we are looking at is a boiler replacement or boiler scrappage scheme. Unlike the English scheme, which appears to be on a "first come first served basis", any scheme administered under the Fuel Poverty Strategy would be targeted at vulnerable people who are fuel poor. All of the proposals from the new Fuel Poverty Strategy will be subject to public consultation which will be held in the spring. The qualifying criteria for a boiler replacement or boiler scrappage scheme would be developed as part of the public consultation.

Vacant Flats at Lochview Estate, Holywood

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development when a final decision will be made on the removal of the vacant flats at Lochview Estate, Holywood.

(AQW 4775/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has been working closely with the Housing Executive to identify a way forward for the West Green flats at Loughview in Holywood. A revised Economic Appraisal has now been completed and is currently under technical assessment within my Department. I expect to be able to make a formal announcement in the coming weeks.

Social Housing Development Programme Strategic Guidelines

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development whether proposals within the Social Housing Development Programme Strategic Guidelines to remove the ring-fenced funding for social housing new builds in north and west Belfast and Derry have been abandoned, as stated by the Chief Executive of the Housing Executive to the Social Development Committee on 10 December 2009; and what impact this will have on social housing new builds in Derry and north and west Belfast.

(AQW 4783/10)

Minister for Social Development: The revised Strategic Guidelines currently distribute the Social Housing Development Programme on the basis of an area's proportionate share of total housing stress and importantly, is also weighted to reflect the length of time applicants wait before being rehoused. The revised guidelines which effectively remove ring fencing have not been abandoned. There is therefore no impact on the social housing new build programme

Economy 7 Heating Systems

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties are currently reliant on (i) Economy 7 heating; and (ii) basic electricity for heating in each Housing Executive district; and what plans she has to replace these with more efficient heating systems.

(AQW 4787/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the Economy 7 heating systems and basic electric heating systems in Housing Executive properties by district office. Replacement of existing heating schemes is carried out on a planned basis where Economy 7 exists in an estate undergoing heating replacements. Tenants are offered the opportunity to switch to oil or gas where available but may opt to retain Economy 7 and significant numbers do so for reasons of convenience. The Housing Executive has provisionally planned to replace a further 624 Economy 7 heating systems in 2010/11, although this will be dependant on the availability of funding. It also plans to offer replacement heating to remaining Economy 7 users over the next five years.

District Office	Economy 7 Heating	Basic Electric Heating
West Belfast	471	15
East Belfast	473	2
South Belfast	390	5
North Belfast	862	1
Shankill	302	3
Ballymena	512	5
Antrim	327	0
Newtownabbey 1	463	3
Newtownabbey 2	292	0

District Office	Economy 7 Heating	Basic Electric Heating
Carrickfergus	160	17
Larne	256	0
Ballycastle	11	0
Ballymoney	91	0
Coleraine	524	3
Banbridge	106	0
Newry	264	0
Armagh	195	0
Lurgan Brownlow	543	2
Portadown	316	0
Dungannon	109	1
Fermanagh	142	0
Bangor	560	7
Newtownards	449	6
Castlereagh	1088	102
Lisburn Antrim	638	25
Lisburn Dairyfarm	34	0
Downpatrick	344	0
Waterloo Place	241	0
Waterside	219	0
Collon Terrace	313	1
Limavady	145	0
Magherafelt	53	1
Strabane	17	0
Omagh	84	0
Cookstown	57	2

Warm Homes Plus Scheme

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 4529/10, what plans she has to upgrade the 466 homes in the Armagh and Newry Districts with the installation of a fully controlled energy-efficient oil or natural gas central heating system, given that under her Department's Warm Homes 'Plus' Scheme, Economy 7 is recognised as being inefficient.

(AQW 4807/10)

Minister for Social Development: Replacement of existing heating schemes is carried out on a planned basis where Economy 7 exists in an estate undergoing heating replacements. Tenants are offered the opportunity to switch to oil or gas where available but may opt to retain Economy 7 and significant numbers do so for reasons of convenience. The Housing Executive's draft 2010/11 maintenance

programme includes 23 properties with Economy 7 in Newry for replacement. The delivery of this scheme is however, dependent on funding. The Housing Executive also plans to offer replacement heating to remaining Economy 7 users over the next five years.

Decent Homes Standard

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many properties in each District Council area do not currently meet the Decent Homes Standard.

(AQW 4810/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the latest available figures regarding all dwellings which do not meet the Decent Homes standards, across all tenures and by District Council area. The figures are taken from the Housing Executive's 2006 Northern Ireland House Condition Survey.

District Council Area	Total
Antrim	4180
Ards	7970
Armagh	6440
Ballymena	6320
Ballymoney	2450
Banbridge	5010
Belfast	26660
Carrickfergus	2770
Castlereagh	5000
Coleraine	6240
Cookstown	2940
Craigavon	7450
Derry	10760
Down	4590
Dungannon	4170
Fermanagh	6090
Larne	3200
Limavady	3390
Lisburn	8390
Magherafelt	2710
Moyle	1550
Newry and Mourne	10530
Newtownabbey	8790
North Down	7320
Omagh	3780
Strabane	3400
Total	162100

Mesothelioma Sufferers: Compensation

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of (a) successful; and (b) unsuccessful claims for compensation made by sufferers of mesothelioma; (ii) the average amount of compensation awarded; and (iii) the sum total of all compensation paid, since the new compensation legislation was introduced.

(AQW 4900/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is as follows:

- (i) A total of nineteen claims have been made under the 2008 Mesothelioma Scheme, which was introduced on 1 October 2008. Eighteen claims have been successful and one was unsuccessful. No claims are outstanding.
- (ii) The average payment made to successful customers was £19,404.
- (iii) A total of £349,272 has been paid out under the 2008 Mesothelioma Scheme.

Alcohol Licences

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development how many retailers have lost their licence to sell alcohol due to selling products to underage drinkers in each of the last five years, broken down by local council area.

(AQW 4903/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department is responsible for the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, which regulates the sale and consumption of alcohol by retail in local licensed premises. Convictions for breaches of the legislation are a matter for the courts. My Department does not hold records of convictions; this information, in relation to court districts, may be obtained from the Northern Ireland Court Service.

Economy 7 Heating Systems

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive homes which are reliant on Economy 7 heating, broken down by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 5036/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below details the Economy 7 heating systems in Housing Executive properties by district office.

District Office	Economy 7 Heating
West Belfast	471
East Belfast	473
South Belfast	390
North Belfast	862
Shankill	302
Ballymena	512
Antrim	327
Newtownabbey 1	463
Newtownabbey 2	292
Carrickfergus	160
Larne	256

District Office	Economy 7 Heating
Ballycastle	11
Ballymoney	91
Coleraine	524
Banbridge	106
Newry	264
Armagh	195
Lurgan Brownlow	543
Portadown	316
Dungannon	109
Fermanagh	142
Bangor	560
Newtownards	449
Castlereagh	1088
Lisburn Antrim	638
Lisburn Dairyfarm	34
Downpatrick	344
Waterloo Place	241
Waterside	219
Collon Terrace	313
Limavady	145
Magherafelt	53
Strabane	17
Omagh	84
Cookstown	57

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Car Parks at Parliament Buildings

Mr J Shannon asked the Assembly Commission to consider issuing a statement to all users of the east and west car parks at Parliament Buildings, reminding them to park within the guiding white lines so that all spaces can be used effectively.

(AQW 4656/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson): The ongoing pressures on car parking, particularly on Sitting days have been raised again with the Commission. As a result, the Director General wrote to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel with a view to eliciting a strategic approach to this perennial problem that affects all those who have a need to park within the Stormont Estate.

In an effort to ensure the most efficient use of the upper car parks, steps have already been taken to cone off those areas where habitual double parking has often occurred. In addition to maximising the use of very limited resources, this action has the added benefit of minimising obstruction to car park users.

A Postmaster will also now be forwarded to all upper car park users requesting that they park vehicles within the designated white lines.

Flags on Parliament Buildings

Mr J Dallat asked the Assembly Commission to detail the number of occasions on which (i) the Union flag; (ii) the European Union flag; (iii) the Assembly flag; and (iv) the Irish Tricolour were flown on Parliament Buildings, in each of the last three years

(AQW 4765/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson): The number of occasions that the aforementioned flags have been flown in the past three years is as follows:

	2007	2008	2009
Union Flag	15	15	15
European Flag	1	1	1
Irish Tricolour	0	0	0

On one occasion during each of these years, i.e. Europe Day, the Union and European flags were jointly flown.

I can also confirm that the Northern Ireland Assembly does not have its own flag as such.

Department of Finance and Personnel

The Block Grant

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if additional borrowing by the Executive would lead to a reduction in the block grant.

(AQW 3583/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The UK Government's funding arrangements for the Northern Ireland Executive are set out in the HM Treasury publication, Statement of Funding Policy, which indicates that borrowing by the devolved administrations counts towards the UK Public Sector Net Cash Requirement.

Therefore, under the current arrangements, any increase in borrowing by the Executive would result in a corresponding reduction in the Block Grant, in order to restore the UK borrowing position.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Ambulance Fleet

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many of the 60 new ambulances will be (i) additional vehicles to the ambulance fleet; and (ii) replacement vehicles for the existing fleet.

(AQW 3351/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): On 1 October 2008 I announced my intention to invest some £100 million over the next ten years to enable the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular

basis. This included an investment of £17 million capital funding over the CSR period 2008-2011 to modernise the ambulance service fleet, estate, equipment and IT infrastructure. My announcement made clear that the new vehicles would replace older vehicles so that, in time, no vehicle would be more than five years old.

Rapid Response Vehicles

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if rapid response vehicles are equipped with exactly the same level of equipment as emergency ambulances.
(AQW 3353/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQWs 1249/10 and 1250/10 on 20 October 2009.

Ambulance Crew Overtime

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many ambulance shifts in the Western Health and Social Care Trust were covered by crew members on overtime due to staff sickness in each month of the last three years.
(AQW 3357/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) does not routinely collect data of the type requested. Arrangements for covering ambulance shifts in the event of crew members being unavailable for duty are dealt with on a day-to-day basis by local management.

Emergency Ambulances and Rapid Response Vehicles

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many of the announced additional 65,000 ambulance hours will be covered by (i) emergency ambulances; and (ii) rapid response vehicles.
(AQW 3358/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Details of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's plans for Comprehensive Spending Review efficiency savings and investment may be found on the Trust's website at: www.niamb.co.uk/docs/documents/news_downloads/CSR%20Final%20EQIA%20and%20Consultation%20Report.pdf.

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.

Employment and Learning

Merger of Stranmillis College and Queen's University

In Bound Volume 47, page WA268, replace the answer to question (AQW 4077/10) asked by Mr Easton with:

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, 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.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Closure of Libraries

In Bound Volume 48, page WA13, replace the answer to question (AQW 4564/10) asked by Ms J McCann with:

Libraries NI's strategic review of the Greater Belfast library estate is focussed on making the best use of the available resources to improve the effectiveness of Public Library Services in the City rather than on generating substantial efficiency savings.

The proposals from the review are currently out for public consultation and the Libraries NI Board have made no final decisions regarding the closure of any library. Libraries NI have extended the consultation period by 1 month (to 5 April 2010) to allow as many people as possible to contribute. I would encourage everyone with an interest to take part in the ongoing consultation.

In the longer term there will be limited savings from reduced running costs (utilities and rates) and ultimately some income from the sale of some of the library buildings which are no longer required. Any resources saved from the closure of a public library will be reinvested in improving library services elsewhere.

Most of the efficiencies released however will not have monetary value. Rather the resources saved (such as staff time, public access computers and stock) will be redeployed to improve services elsewhere in Belfast.

Libraries NI have provided a summary of the resources which would be released if each of the libraries under review were to close (Annex A).

ANNEX A

SUMMARY OF RESOURCES USED BY EACH BRANCH LIBRARY NOT CONSIDERED VIABLE

Branch	Annual running costs (£) (1)	Maintenance backlog (£) (2)	Staff hours per Week (3)	Number of Public Access computers (4)	If closed would site be sold? (5)
Andersonstown	11,807.67	34,635	67.00	4	A
Ballyhackamore	32,549.33	1,150	147.00	5	Yes
Ballymacarett	31,874.67	95,000	104.00	4	Yes

Branch	Annual running costs (£) (1)	Maintenance backlog (£) (2)	Staff hours per Week (3)	Number of Public Access computers (4)	If closed would site be sold? (5)
Belvoir	6,058.91	5,300	31.50	3	B
Braniel	4,905.79	28,250	35.00	3	B
Cloughfern	4,271.98	3,700	29.00	4	B
Dunmurry	2,109.86	6,450	28.00	3	B
Gilnahirk	3,906.54	22,300	30.00	2	B
Ligoniel	11,504.33	50,975	102.00	2	Yes
Oldpark	6,882.33	54,975	19.66	2	A
Sandy Row	16,704.00	7,410	11.08	2	No
Tullycarnet	35,854.55	19,610	181.75	20	Yes
Whitewell	3,603.00	8,875	10.00	2	B
Woodstock	32,693.33	5,770	163.00	5	Yes

- (1) Including utilities, rates, maintenance and allowance for management (EG deliveries), does not include staff costs.
- (2) Will not be required in the event of closure.
- (3) Will be used to improve opening hours in other libraries – no staff will loose their jobs.
- (4) Will be relocated to other libraries and made more available to the public.
- (5) A - major covenants in the lease affecting the value; B - part of public sector complex (Health/Education) - proceeds if sold determined by District Valuer.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Irish Language

In Bound Volume 48, page WA13, replace the answer to question (AQW 4575/10) asked by Mr Adams with:

Since coming into office at the beginning of July 2009, I have given special attention to the development of a Minority Languages Strategy.

It is my intention to bring forward a draft strategy to the Executive by the end of March which can then go out to consultation.

One strand of this strategy will be to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language as set out in Section 15 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006.

The preparation of this draft Minority Languages Strategy will require engagement with, and commitments from, a number of other Northern Ireland Executive departments - especially in relation to education - and from the United Kingdom government in relation to broadcasting.

Ulster-Scots Language

In Bound Volume 48, page WA13, replace the answer to question (AQW 4597/10) asked by Miss McIlveen with:

Since coming into office at the beginning of July 2009, I have given special attention to the development of a Minority Languages Strategy.

It is my intention to bring forward a draft strategy to the Executive by the end of March which can then go out to consultation.

One strand of this strategy will be to enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture as set out in Section 15 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006.

The preparation of this draft Minority Languages Strategy will require engagement with, and commitments from, a number of other Northern Ireland Executive departments - especially in relation to education - and from the United Kingdom government in relation to broadcasting.

Social Development

Benefits for Cross-Border Workers

In Bound Volume 48, page WA96, replace the answer to question (AQW 4518/10) asked by Mr Durkan with:

Officials of the Social Security Agency (SSA) met with representatives from the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) on 28 October 2009. The meeting was convened by the North South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat with Mr Tommy Gallagher MLA also in attendance. Whilst Tax Credits are administered by HM Revenue and Customs, and therefore outside the remit of my Department, a useful discussion took place in relation to access to other social security benefits by cross border workers including those factors impacting on the speedy processing of benefit applications. A mechanism for referring individual cases to either the SSA or DSFA for appropriate investigation was agreed.

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