



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 58

(22 November 2010 to 12 December 2010)

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Assembly Members

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Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)	McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)	McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
Armstrong, Billy (Mid Ulster)	McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)	McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
Bannside, The Lord (North Antrim)	McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)	McClarty, David (East Londonderry)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)	McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)	McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)	McDevitt, Conall (South Belfast)
Bradley, Mrs Mary (Foyle)	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair (South Belfast)
Bradley, P J (South Down)	McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)	McFarland, Alan (North Down)
Bresland, Allan (West Tyrone)	McGill, Mrs Claire (West Tyrone)
Browne, The Lord (East Belfast)	McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)	McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
Burns, Thomas (South Antrim)	McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
Butler, Paul (Lagan Valley)	McHugh, Gerry (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Callaghan, Pól (Foyle)	McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)	McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)	McLaughlin, Mitchel (South Antrim)
Clarke, Willie (South Down)	McNarry, David (Strangford)
Cobain, Fred (North Belfast)	McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Coulter, Rev Dr Robert (North Antrim)	Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)	Maskey, Alex (South Belfast)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)	Maskey, Paul (West Belfast)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)	Molloy, Francie (Mid Ulster)
Deeny, Dr Kieran (West Tyrone)	Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)	Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Easton, Alex (North Down)	Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Neeson, Sean (East Antrim)
Empey, Sir Reg (East Belfast)	Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Farry, Dr Stephen (North Down)	Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ford, David (South Antrim)	O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	O'Loan, Declan (North Antrim)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)	O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Gallagher, Tommy (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)	Purvis, Ms Dawn (East Belfast)
Gibson, Simpson (Strangford)	Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)	Ritchie, Ms Margaret (South Down)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)	Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)	Robinson, Ken (East Antrim)
Hay, William (Speaker)	Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)	Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)	Ruane, Ms Caitríona (South Down)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)	Savage, George (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)	Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast) <i>(from 7 December 2010)</i>
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)	Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)	Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Kinahan, Danny (South Antrim)	Weir, Peter (North Down)
Leonard, Billy (East Londonderry)	Wells, Jim (South Down)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)	Wilson, Brian (North Down)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)	Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)	

Principal Officers and Officials of the Assembly

Speaker.....	Mr William Hay MLA
Deputy Speakers.....	Mr John Dallat MLA Mr David McClarty MLA Mr Francie Molloy MLA
Clerk to the Assembly/Director-General.....	Mr Trevor Reaney
Director of Clerking and Reporting	Mr John Stewart
Director of Engagement	Dr Gareth McGrath
Director of Facilities/Keeper of the House.....	Mr Stephen Welch
Director of Legal Services	Mr Hugh Widdis
Director of Resources	Mr Richard Stewart
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Mr Gordon Nabney
Clerk Assistants.....	Ms Nuala Dunwoody Mr Damien Martin
Editor of Debates	Mr Simon Burrowes
Clerk to the Assembly Commission.....	Mr Tony Logue

Ministerial Offices

The Executive Committee

First Minister	Mr Peter Robinson
Deputy First Minister	Mr Martin McGuinness
Minister for Employment and Learning	Mr Danny Kennedy
Minister for Regional Development	Mr Conor Murphy
Minister for Social Development	Mr Alex Attwood
Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.....	Ms Michelle Gildernew
Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.....	Mr Nelson McCausland
Minister of Education.....	Ms Caitríona Ruane
Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.....	Mrs Arlene Foster
Minister of the Environment	Mr Edwin Poots
Minister of Finance and Personnel.....	Mr Sammy Wilson
Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	Mr Michael McGimpsey
Minister of Justice.....	Mr David Ford

Junior Ministers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	Mr Gerry Kelly
	Mr Robin Newton

Assembly Sittings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 November 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Student Loans (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Employment and Learning, Mr Danny Kennedy, to move the Consideration Stage of the Student Loans (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr Kennedy).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the two clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question on the long title.

Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Student Loans (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Armed Forces and Veterans Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Elliott): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 January 2011, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Armed Forces and Veterans Bill [NIA 33/09].

The Armed Forces and Veterans Bill passed its Second Stage on 12 October 2010. At its meeting on 20 October 2010, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed that it would take the lead on the scrutiny of the Bill. That decision followed discussions with the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The Committee is seeking an extension until 28 January 2011 to allow it to scrutinise the Armed Forces and Veterans Bill fully and to consider possible amendments. I ask Members for their support.

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 28 January 2011, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Armed Forces and Veterans Bill [NIA 33/09].

Statutory Committee Membership: Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Statutory Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Pól Callaghan replace Mrs Mary Bradley as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

Private Members' Business

Seventieth Anniversary of the Death of Lord Craigavon

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

Mr Storey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the seventieth anniversary of the death of Lord Craigavon, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

It is with a sense of honour and privilege that I stand in the Chamber today to open the debate on the seventieth anniversary of the death of James Craig, who was later to be known as Lord Craigavon. Very few people on this island have been so systematically misquoted and wrongly vilified as he has been.

At the very beginning of the debate, let me expand on that important matter. Nationalists of varying shades have invested much time and energy into demonising and engaging in a character assassination of Lord Craigavon. They have falsely asserted that he once boasted of a Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people. That assertion and allegation is untrue. After de Valera had asserted that the South was a Catholic nation, Craigavon responded by saying:

"The hon. Member must remember that in the South they boasted of a Catholic State. They still boast of Southern Ireland being a Catholic State. All I boast of is that we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State."

So much time and energy has been expended on trying to destroy a person's name and character, and they could not even manage to quote him correctly.

James Craig had a distinguished career in the military and served in the Boer war, in which he was injured and captured. He is rightly regarded as the father of Northern Ireland. Although Sir Edward Carson was its public face, Craig was the architect of Ulster unionist resistance to home rule from 1912 to 1914. He arranged for Sir Edward Carson to act as that public face while he masterminded the campaign.

It was Craig who organised the signing of the Ulster Covenant and stage-managed the Ulster Day in September 1912. The covenant document was signed throughout Ulster and by people from Ulster who lived in the rest of Ireland, and on mainland Britain, including 2,000 people in Dublin. One striking feature was the support that it drew from all classes of unionism, including labourers, professionals, gentry, aristocrats and clergy. Another remarkable feature was the number of women who signed the declaration. The wording of the declaration that women signed differed from that of that covenant. It allowed women to:

“associate ourselves with the men of Ulster in their uncompromising opposition to the Home Rule Bill now before Parliament”.

Some 228,990 women signed in Ulster compared with 218,206 men, and some 5,000 women signed elsewhere as against 19,000 men, making a grand total of 471,414 persons.

In many ways, it was down to Craig that the means were created by which Ulster unionism was united. In those stormy days, Craig was also a chief mover in the formation of the old UVF and in the gunrunning in Larne. The cry of “Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right” was not uttered casually. Those were turbulent times across the island of Ireland, and the reverberations of those days are still felt by all sections of our society today. Who would have thought that it would take until now before it could seriously be suggested that Her Majesty The Queen might visit the South? However, the events of that time have cast a long shadow.

I know that some in the Chamber look to the people who were involved in the events of 1916. However, I and many here today and across the Province look to the men and women of the covenant, to the old volunteers and to the 36th (Ulster) Division.

In mentioning the 36th (Ulster) Division, I should point out that the outbreak of the First World War saw unionist resistance to home rule translated into a large-scale recruitment of troops, and it was Craig who encouraged the UVF to enlist. He helped to recruit the 36th (Ulster) Division and served as its Quartermaster General. He held a junior office in the wartime coalition Government and held a succession of junior British Government posts with distinction between 1917 and 1921, even though he resigned along with Carson in 1918. Craig also

helped to draft the Government of Ireland Act 1920. In fact, it was partly due to him that a six-county territory for Northern Ireland was chosen over the nine-county model favoured by English Ministers and some unionists.

In 1921, Craig was unanimously elected as the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, something that, in recent times, only Basil McCrea thought that he could emulate. On the foundation of the Northern Ireland state in 1921, Craig became Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, a position that he was to hold until his death in 1940.

James Craig was an advocate of the Ulster Special Constabulary as an effective means of protecting the new frontier, and, during his premiership, Craig overcame the military and political opposition that the new Northern Ireland faced. That was especially the case when it came to the IRA campaign of 1920-22, and just as the IRA was seen off in future times, so Craig beat them in his day. Craig withstood the British Government's efforts to subordinate Northern Ireland to a Dublin Parliament during the treaty negotiations. On one occasion, at the request of Lloyd George, he travelled to Dublin to meet de Valera. Accompanied by a Sinn Féin guard, he was driven by a secret route to meet his arch-opponent.

He also entered into substantive negotiations with Michael Collins, but, unfortunately, Collins would ultimately use those negotiations to demand the acquisition of northern territory. That led to an outbreak of violence before the Craig/Collins pact of 1922, which, on the southern side, was signed by Michael Collins, Kevin O'Higgins, Eamonn Duggan and Arthur Griffith. The provisions of that pact included a declaration of peace; an insistence that the two Governments co-operate in every way in their power to restore peaceful conditions in unsettled areas; the reorganisation of policing; the establishment of non-jury trials; the establishment of an independent commission made up of equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics to examine allegations of intimidation, and so on; an end to all IRA activities; the right to return home for those who had been displaced; and, somewhat controversially, the release of what were called political prisoners. There is a sense of déjà vu for many of us in the House today. Such was Craig's influence that Sir Edward Carson said:

"It was Craig who did most of the work and I got most of the credit."

After approximately 20 years as Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, Lord Craigavon passed away. Today, his earthly remains and those of his dear wife lie buried in the Stormont estate. In the coming days, there will be a succession of dates and anniversaries. Each could be regarded as negative by some and be abused by others, yet, whether they are for good or ill, those dates and anniversaries will come. As a society, we have made considerable strides in recent times, and some of the most significant were made in the past three years. We still have a considerable way to go, and there are still those who wish to drag us back, but we must not allow them to do so.

As with James Craig's generation, so I and my generation have lived through days of violence and blood. Those days and those horrors have scarred many of us, and we shall take those scars to our graves. The DUP is determined that the generations to come will have a different story to tell and will pass on a different legacy to their children.

I stand here today to celebrate the life and contribution of Lord Craigavon. I do so determined that, just as the new state of Northern Ireland was born from the flames of those controversies, a new Northern Ireland, for this day and for future days, will be born from the fires of our past.

I trust that, with respect and reverence, the House will remember the late Lord Craigavon.

12.15 pm

Mr O Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The motion reads:

"That this Assembly notes the seventieth anniversary of the death of Lord Craigavon".

I have no difficulty with that in itself. My difficulty is that the House is not a historical society, and it is not a society for remembrance. It is a political institution that is charged with the well-being of our community and our society.

The island of Ireland is in economic turmoil. We face rising unemployment. We do not yet know the outcome of the discussions between the Dublin Government, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU. Those discussions will have serious repercussions for the economy in

this part of the island. I note that some unionist colleagues are nodding their heads in agreement. I welcome that, because anyone, regardless of their political point of view, who believes that what happened in Dublin over the weekend is to the benefit of this society is sadly mistaken.

Why do I raise those points? I do so because I want to know why we are debating this matter. After last week's motion when the DUP sorted out how we cut grass, do we need to note the seventieth anniversary of Craigavon's death? I suspect not.

Mr Storey: If we are to move forward with respect, as the Member and his colleagues tell us and encourage us to, surely, given the importance that Lord Craigavon had, and has, to many in Northern Ireland — he was the first Prime Minister in this Building, and our longest-serving Prime Minister — it is only right and proper that, despite the difficulties economically, we have the opportunity to mark the occasion in the way that we have done today.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member's point is perfectly valid. I have no difficulty with collective remembrance and debate about our history. The history of Lord Craigavon and his term as the first Prime Minister of this state is something that should be debated.

We have a number of anniversaries coming up, such as the 1912 signing of the covenant. Republicans should not be, nor are we, afraid to debate and to remember such occasions. That debate would be healthy and informative for this community. The anniversary of the 1913 great lockout in Dublin is coming up, and the turmoil that that caused in Irish politics should be remembered. The 1916 uprising should be remembered and debated by unionists, nationalists and republicans. The landing of guns by the UVF should also be remembered. They were the first people to bring guns into twentieth-century Irish politics. That, and the implications that it had for our society, should be discussed. Clearly, the debate has to go both ways. We may not have much reverence for the first Prime Minister of this state, and the reasons for that must be debated.

I note that the Member was quick off the mark to correct the quotation attributed to Craigavon. "A Protestant state for a Protestant people" is not exactly what he said. However, the old saying, "actions speak louder than words", comes to mind, because we ended up with a

Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people. That said, however, the irony is that it was not a Protestant Parliament for all the Protestant people, because the working-class Protestant community suffered intolerably under that regime, in the same way that nationalists did. The difficulty then — we are slipping back into this a wee bit — was that those who led “big house” unionism told working-class Protestant communities that they were better off under their rule. They told them that it did not matter that they were unemployed, that they could not feed their children or that poverty was rife, because there was a Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people.

As the months roll on and all those anniversaries approach, it is important to recognise that the northern state failed not only nationalists but the working-class Protestant community. If we repeat the mistakes of the past, we fail all our communities, because, regardless of Craigavon's intentions when the northern state was set up, it failed. That resulted in many years of bloody conflict on all sides, and it involved the weapons brought in by the UVF, as well as weapons brought in by others.

I will end on a positive note, as did the mover of the motion. This society is changing. In Craigavon's day, it would never have been thought that republicans and unionists would share power. Indeed, my father's generation would not have envisaged nationalists and republicans sharing power with unionism. That has brought changes and challenges for both sides of society. Therefore, as we move forward towards our respective important anniversaries, do not doubt for one minute that republicans will honour unionists' rights to commemorate them, nor will we shy away from debating the important subjects that all such events raise. There is an important debate to be had on that.

However, if anything will help, it is that we do not rewrite history. We should learn from our past. It is still my strong view, and the strong view of my party, that the northern state failed. In recent years, we have come to a realisation that we have to work together. I welcome and continue to endorse that. We should not allow those who are trying to drag us back into conflict to do so. Progress will be made on the island of Ireland if we work together. However, the Assembly, at this time in its history, has much more important things to do than debate grass or note the death of Craigavon.

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

Mr O'Dowd: We are in economic turmoil, and if we are to serve the future well, we need to sort that out, and then we can commemorate for as long as we wish.

Mr Elliott: I am honoured to stand here as the fourteenth leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and to pay my utmost respect to, and state my appreciation for, the fourth leader of my party. It is interesting to hear Mr O'Dowd talk about republicans. I am pleased that he welcomes the celebration of Mr Craig's life.

He returned to the old republican adage of Northern Ireland's being a failed political identity. However, is he not, at this stage, pleased that we are not part of an all-Ireland state that is going down the tubes financially and politically? I am sure that he is, for once, pleased to be part of a Northern Ireland that is part of the United Kingdom.

Mr O'Dowd: I opened my remarks by saying that I hope that unionists realise that what is happening in Dublin will have a strong economic effect here, especially in your border constituency of Fermanagh. Therefore, I would not relish too much what is going on in Dublin. We will feel it and feel it hard.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr Elliott: Of course I do not relish that. All I am trying to say is that I am sure that Mr O'Dowd and his colleagues are pleased that they are not part of that at the moment. That is all.

I welcome the motion. James Craig was a soldier, statesman, and, most importantly to him and to all of us, an Ulsterman. He found his calling after returning from fighting in the Boer war, in which he was noted for his selfless bravery and dedication to his men. That particular war produced two politicians who would go on to shape British and Irish politics like no others: James Craig and Winston Churchill.

I am pleased to note that James Craig first dipped his toe into elected politics in my home county of Fermanagh. That county's by-election in 1904 gave Craig the opportunity to organise his first political campaign. Although Edward Mitchell had been expected to retain the seat with a large majority, the fact that Craig missed

out by only 152 votes shook the political foundations of the county.

That narrow defeat convinced Craig that his heart and soul lay with Ulster politics. Just two years later, in 1906, his chance came to contest the East Down seat in the general election. To anyone who knew him and his style of campaigning, it came as no surprise that he won that seat. We could all learn a lesson from the way in which he engaged with the electorate during that election.

It was highly appropriate, and typical of Craig, that his maiden speech and the first legislation that he introduced after being elected to Westminster related to the welfare of those serving in the armed forces. I am pleased that my colleague David McNarry is bringing a private Member's Bill on a similar subject through the House.

While Craigavon was quickly getting down to business at Parliament, his reputation was growing. He was quickly becoming one of Ireland's foremost unionist leaders, and he went on to become a founding member of the Ulster Unionist Council, which is a body that I am proud to lead today.

Craigavon's first few years of elected politics were truly a baptism of fire. No sooner was he elected than the home rule crisis developed. It was then that the partnership between Craigavon and another great Ulsterman, Edward Carson, developed. The signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912 was a testament to Craig's leadership and administrative skills. For months in advance, he vigorously organised the event. The sight of 237,000 men and 234,000 women signing the covenant is an everlasting legacy of the legitimate commitment of the Ulster people to the union. The covenant made reference to our material well-being, and I think that many Members here today are grateful that so many men and women took such a stand. It is an event that the Ulster Unionist Party is incredibly proud of, and we plan to celebrate its hundredth anniversary.

The political structure of Ireland was changing. When Carson and Craig resigned from the British Government in 1918, they dedicated their time to the unionist cause. The 1920 Government of Ireland Act demonstrated Ulster unionism's success in securing the union. Indeed, in 1929, Craig went on to comment that Ulster would only be entirely safe within the union when it received its own Parliament.

James Craig became our Province's first Prime Minister in 1921, and I am thankful for the dedication and commitment that he showed to the Ulster people almost 100 years ago. I recognise and welcome the fact that Northern Ireland is a changing place today, and I hope that Members on the other Benches recognise the role of Craigavon.

Mr A Maginness: In some ways, the motion raises a very important issue, which is how we deal with commemorations that are coming up in the near future in relation to all sorts of things, including 1916, which was mentioned. There are also other commemorations that involve greater political events in Ireland, both North and South. At some stage, we really ought to look at that on an all-party basis to see whether we can commemorate those events in a sensible, sober and enlightening way, instead of indulging in partisan rhetoric.

The motion is interesting. I want to make some observations in relation to Lord Craigavon. First, there is no doubt that he was a great personality, politically and socially. There is also no doubt that he was a very talented man and a great organiser. He was also very kind and very generous, and many nationalist members of the House of Commons of Northern Ireland paid tribute to him on those terms when he died. However, I will also put forward the proposition that he gave a great disservice to unionism as well as to nationalism, because he turned unionism from Irish unionism into Ulster unionism. That was a great disservice to the unionist cause in Ireland, and it was a great disservice to all the people in Ireland, because, effectively, he sectarianised unionism and made it into a regional, provincial, inward-looking, parochial, political ideology. That was a great disservice to the politics of Ireland. Secondly —

Mr Campbell: The Member somewhat unfairly categorised Craigavon when he talked about the move from Irish unionism to Ulster unionism. Given the context of the time, does he accept that Craigavon had little choice when what later became the Irish Republic decided that it no longer wanted to be part of the United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

12.30 pm

Mr A Maginness: The Member raises an interesting point. Of course, Craigavon came to

prominence, along with Carson, between 1912 and 1914 at the time of the third home rule Bill. The Bill had nothing to do with republicanism or Ireland's independence; it was to do with an autonomous Irish Parliament.

Craigavon opposed the Bill. He opposed it by force of arms, not just politically. It was he, Craigavon, and his colleagues who reintroduced the gun into Irish politics in the twentieth century. Since the 1798 rebellion, there had been no organised violence in Ireland for a period of around 100 years. Yes: there was agrarian unrest and violence. However, there was no organised violence on a paramilitary scale. He introduced that by arming the Ulster Volunteer Force.

It was Craigavon who tried to subvert the Government at Westminster. He was, in fact, treacherous to that Government by importing arms from Germany and introducing, once again, paramilitarism into Irish politics. As a result, he did a great disservice not just to Irish nationalism and to the Irish people as a whole, but to unionism, because he turned it into a violent political movement at that time. He used the force of arms to create a situation in which the home rule Bill would not be permitted in Ireland. He, therefore, tried to subvert the authority of the British Parliament.

That was to bring about a colossal calamity for this country. Ultimately, it ended in the country's partition, which Carson, at the end of his life, said was a failure. Carson regarded partition as quite wrong. In other words, the partition of this island did no good service to either the unionist or the nationalist political tradition here, because all that it brought about was greater disunity and violence in this country. We have paid a sorry and heavy price for that ever since.

When Craigavon got into power, he created a situation in which this Parliament became sectarianised. The quotation to which the proposer of the motion referred, in essence, sums up the sectarian attitude that he adopted towards the six-county state.

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

Mr A Maginness: He regarded that state as a Protestant state. Sadly, that brought about tremendous ill-feeling and hurt over many years.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lunn: I suppose that, in common with most prominent figures in history, Lord Craigavon's legacy would be viewed differently by different sides of the House. My party recognises the major contribution that he made to Irish and Northern Irish politics during a career in elected office that stretched from 1906 to his death in 1940.

Before he entered active politics, he found time to serve his country in the Boer war and, subsequently, in the First World War. Apparently, he also established a stockbroking company, which he achieved at 21 years of age. Therefore, he was a man who lived life to the full as a businessman, soldier and active and significant politician.

As other Members have mentioned, politically, he was involved in the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force. He was one of the authors of the 1912 Solemn League and Covenant. Therefore, his solid unionist and Protestant credentials were firmly displayed. However, at the same time, he seems to have enjoyed the respect of his political opponents and individual Catholics of the day.

When one looks at Lord Craigavon's history, three points stand out. I acknowledge that I do not know as much about his history as some Members who have already spoken in the debate. First, his famous and oft-repeated phrase:

"a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant state",

was, evidently, a reply to de Valera's assertion that Ireland was a Catholic nation. I do not believe that either statement was particularly helpful. However, I suppose that, at the time, that was how people spoke.

Secondly, he was instrumental in shaping modern Northern Ireland by convincing the unionists in Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal that, perhaps for the greater good of Ulster unionism, they should agree to remain in the Irish state, lest they upset the arithmetic and Protestant domination —

Mr A Maginness: Was the reason for moving from a nine-county province of Ulster to six counties not that he wanted to ensure a permanent and absolute majority for unionism within the Six Counties? That was the reason why he did it. It underscores my argument that he was sectarian in his approach.

Mr Speaker: The Member has one extra minute on to his time.

Mr Lunn: Mr Maginness did not allow me to finish my sentence. I was going to say that he convinced those unionists to remain in the Irish state, lest they upset the arithmetic and Protestant domination of the Six Counties. So, I take Mr Maginness's point.

Mr A Maginness: I am sorry about that.

Mr Lunn: It is all right.

Thirdly, and most disappointingly — and nobody has mentioned it — he allowed the division of our school system, the imposition of Protestant doctrine in state schools and the breakaway of the Catholic schools. He was on record as being a supporter of shared education, and I do not suppose that he had to give way on that at the time. I think that that was a shame, and it is a decision that has reverberated down the years and affects our politics today.

It is right that we note this type of anniversary. However, whether we note it by way of an hour-and-a-half's debate on parliamentary time is a question that can reasonably be asked. Lord Craigavon was an iconic figure in the history of Ireland. He is one of many from the period of his lifetime, and we will be faced with a lot of commemorations and significant dates in the years to come. I hope that we can deal with those in the reasonably respectful way that we are dealing with this one today.

Mr Moutray: I support this timely motion. In doing so, I declare an interest as the mayor of Craigavon for this year, and I am very proud to be so. The borough was named after Lord Craigavon some 45 years ago on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his passing. The names of Sir Edward Carson and Lord Craigavon are inextricably linked in the collective memories of unionists and in the history not only of Northern Ireland, but of the island as a whole. Both men were of a time and came from a position where there had been no partition in Ireland and the whole of the island was part of the United Kingdom and under the Crown.

As we approach the centenary anniversaries of a number of notable dates, and given the current economic plight of our near neighbours, perhaps it might have been better if the Easter declaration had never been read and the South had never fled the bosom of the United Kingdom. However, we look forward to Her Majesty visiting our near neighbours soon. Who knows? Perhaps Gerry Adams can become

a persuader for harmonisation between the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. We shall watch with interest.

The motion is simple. I have my views on our Province's recent past. I also have my views on the era of men like Carson and Craig, the home rule crisis and the Ulster Covenant. The motion does not ask any Member to share anyone else's interpretation or understanding of those days and those events. Rather, it simply notes the date. May I suggest that this motion offers a template for a number of other dates and anniversaries that will soon be upon us?

In many respects, James Craig was Carson's right-hand man. Carson was the public face, whereas Craig was the organiser. However, James Craig, or Lord Craigavon, was more than a second fiddle. He took the lead in organising the covenant and in encouraging the UVF to sign up during the First World War, as my colleague Mervyn Storey said. Some people look at the loss and the slaughter at charnel houses such as the Somme and see only waste and tragedy. Although it is true that a generation was cut down in the mud, it is also true that those young men were among the most gallant of our sons and that their bravery is forever enshrined in the hearts of many and is repeated even now in the theatres of war across the globe in such places as Afghanistan.

When I was preparing for this debate, and thinking of the covenant and Lord Craigavon's central role in it, I checked the relevant records in the Public Records Office. My name is Moutray — it is not a common name, perhaps of Huguenot descent — and my family came from Fermanagh. There were 18 Moutrays who signed the covenant, the majority from places such as Aughnacloy, Ballygawley and Lisbeg. Some 148 Storeys signed the covenant, from Clones, Cootehill, Raphoe, Harryville, Broughshane and Ballymena. Some 93 Paisleys signed it, and there was even a Sydney Anderson from Upper Bann who signed it, as did a John Hume from Londonderry. Some 31 McGuinnesses signed it, including three from Londonderry. Four Maskeys signed it, as did a whopping 83 Molloyes [*Laughter.*] Obviously the Molloyes were far more loyal than the Maskeys.

The lives of those on all sides of the Chamber and right across the Province are impacted on by the events of those days and the men who shaped them. I salute the memory of Lord

Craigavon and Sir Edward Carson. I am glad that, at a time of great crisis, there were men of that calibre. I hope that we shall not see similar crises and turbulence again. I support the motion.

Mr Craig: As the Member who previously spoke declared an interest as Mayor of Craigavon, I almost feel that I should declare an interest as the only Craig left as a Member in the House. I share that common name with that great man, and I count it as a privilege. Unfortunately for me, I cannot say that I am a direct descendant of his. If I was, I might be sitting on red Benches and not the blue Benches here, but that is another matter.

It is clear that James Craig, or Lord Craigavon, was a very talented individual. It was once suggested that he was the only politician who could win an election from his fireplace. That is quite remarkable. Born on 8 January 1871, he rose to great heights by the time of his death in 1940. His father was a successful businessman, and I noted everyone's reluctance to announce what the business was, because he made the money making whiskey. That is where our paths completely differ, because I have never touched the stuff and, with God's grace, never will.

Craig followed his father into business, but as a stockbroker, and set up shop in Belfast. He then became a soldier at the time of the Boer war, rising to the rank of captain and fighting with the Royal Irish Rifles, then the Imperial Yeomanry. I find that one of life's little queries, because they were fighting the Afrikaners, and I can say little about it, because my brother married one of them, so the Craigs and the Afrikaners are now mixed. It is one of life's true quirks.

He was a true Ulsterman, proud of his roots and his country, and determined to fight to defend what he saw as right. I have heard much said about the sectarianism. I do not believe that there was a sectarian bone in the man's body. He just believed in standing up firmly for what he believed in, and that led to the home rule crisis. During that period, Craig became known for his organisational skills. Carson, on the other hand, was the orator who put forward the unionist argument during that difficult period in our history.

James Craig came to enter elected politics when, in February 1903, his brother, Charles Craig, was returned for the constituency of

South Antrim. Despite missing out himself one month later, he was, however, victorious in 1906 for the constituency of East Down. He held that seat until 1918, when he switched to Mid Down, which he held until he became Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister in 1921, upon the establishment of Stormont. Craig's skills became apparent as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. That is something that we all ignore. He walked into a Parliament for which there was literally no organisation or basis at all. Everything had to be done from scratch. He had to deal with the transfer of powers from Dublin Castle and London to the new Government based in Belfast.

Clearly, that was not an easy task, but it was one that Craig was well and truly prepared for, because he was the great organiser in unionism. Many of his organisational skills were put to good use when he established not only Northern Ireland's Government, but the Civil Service that supports it. In addition to the practicalities of assuming control of Northern Ireland, Craig had also to deal with the continued campaign of violence orchestrated by a reinvigorated IRA. It almost feels like *déjà vu* at times, because some things do not change.

12.45 pm

I was long puzzled by an aspect of the family name "Craig". It is seen on very few memorials in Northern Ireland. When it came to the UVF, I will be honest: most members of his family did not sign up or follow that path. When I was in Edinburgh, I discovered why. It is because we are a true Ulster-Scots family, in name and tradition. Hundreds, if not thousands, of our family members went over to Scotland and signed up with Scottish regiments. Many of them, hundreds of them, fell at the Somme and other areas.

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

Mr Craig: I commend the motion to the House.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member who proposed the motion. I am proud to stand as an Ulster Unionist and pay tribute to one of our party's greatest.

I note the comments that Mr O'Dowd made at the beginning of the debate. The fact that we discuss this motion, or that we discussed grass cutting last week, is not necessarily a problem

created by the Members here. Nevertheless, anyone who thinks that we can ignore the economic crisis less than 100 miles from where we stand is wrong. I have no sense of anyone gloating, but a lot of Members do see irony, in that some Members wish to take us there as a country and as a community.

Born in Sydenham in my own constituency of East Belfast in 1871, Craig was the quintessential Ulsterman. He was quiet and reserved, but he pursued life with dogged persistence. He was always bound by a desire to do what is right. He loved his country, and that was at the forefront of his decision-making process. His successor, John Miller Andrews, remarked:

"His love of country was innate, sincere and strong."

It was the key to his whole career as soldier, statesman, parliamentarian and premier.

As with so many of his generation, as has been mentioned, he was prominent in South Africa during the Boer war. From the beginning, he proved to be a worthy soldier and, despite recognising the horrors of war, continued to serve with distinction. When, in May 1900, one of his superiors, Sir John Power, fell at Lindley, Craig, ignoring the obvious risks, insisted on leading a recovery team to reclaim the body for a proper military burial. On another occasion, when Craig's regiment was captured and forced to march for days to a Boer prison, Craig, alongside Lord Ennismore, turned down the officers' privilege of transport, preferring to remain with the men. Loyalty was to be the hallmark of his career.

When he finally returned home, Craig, like many other politicians of the period, had an improved constitution, a great reputation and considerable experience of leadership. His shock victory in the 1906 general election was secured because he appealed to the minds of the electorate and not just to their emotion. As with his military career, he sought to defend his country with a determination to do what he thought was right.

It would be amiss if, in this debate, we failed to recognise the relationship that Craig had with the other giant of Ulster unionism, Sir Edward Carson. Working together, Craig and Carson redefined the very nature of unionist politics in their desire to protect Ireland's place in the union. Craig's ability and geniality complemented Carson's powerful character and

sense of presence. Each had what the other lacked. Pooling their resources, they became a third and undeniable person. Effective apart, they were irresistible together.

The events that followed and encompassed the home rule period are well known and require no further examination. In everything they did, Carson and Craig sought to do what they thought was in the interests of Ireland. It must be remembered that neither sought partition; neither sought division.

The formation of the state of Northern Ireland in the face of great diversity is the ultimate legacy of Sir James Craig. Working alongside people such as Sir Wilfred Spender, he created and safeguarded Northern Ireland's institutions by 1925. The very House in which we sit is part of that legacy, and that is why I, for one, am always pleased to walk past his statue as I climb the Stairs of this Building. On that point, I would welcome any additional moves by the Assembly Commission to promote the Craigavon tomb that is situated here at Stormont as part of the official tour.

As citizens of Northern Ireland, we have a duty to protect and promote Craigavon House in east Belfast. I suspect that, were it a historical location of a different tradition, it would not be in its current state, despite the work of some loyal people over many years. Given the impact that he had in shaping our community and history, we must remember that what he and others did was done in the name of preserving the union, which is something that we still have to do today.

The price of freedom is eternal vigilance, and, given some of the elements that are still in our community today, we must never forget that. Certain elements are prepared to overthrow the democratic process, and they are still prepared to use force to try to persuade and to force people out of the union. Looking round at what we are faced with today, that would be a stupid thing to do.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Sir Reg Empey: I support the motion.

Mr McDevitt: As we begin what I suspect will not be the final debate on remembrance, it is probably best that we are guided by the words of the great writer who reminds us that people who

do not read their history books are doomed to repeat mistakes.

James Craig appears to have been a man of contradictions, like so many who achieve greatness in politics. He was able to sit down with Collins and reach a deal that would have led to a police service that was more in the image of Patten than the RUC, whose reform so many unionists opposed. He was a man who was willing to contemplate a level of “North/Southerly” that, some might argue, stretches beyond where we are today. Yet, within less than five years of that pact, the same man was able to remove proportional representation from the fledgling Northern Ireland Parliament.

That had a devastating impact, not only on the ability of both communities to be adequately and properly represented in the emerging Northern Ireland state. It also had a devastating — many would argue fatal — impact on labour politics in this region, which served neither Catholic nor unionist but working men and women. We would all agree that, for a long time since, this place has been poorer without that type of politics.

In recognising his contradictions, we must acknowledge what was positive, and we will. However, we must always ask ourselves what a proud Ulsterman aimed to achieve through dividing the Province that he so loved. For an Irish unionist, what was ever to be achieved by governing this region from an introverted perspective? Most historians, as they analyse Lord Craigavon's contribution as Prime Minister, sense a growing and increasing introspection, isolationism and a distancing not just from the Republic, but from Great Britain.

It is a tragedy that a man who undoubtedly had the ability to unite his own, who could motivate and organise, who could have turned his great powers to much better good, failed to make either the emerging Northern Ireland state or relationships on this island half as good as they could have been. In 1932, he asserted his politics firmly and solely in his identity when he said:

“Ours is a Protestant government and I am an Orangeman...I have always said that I am an Orangeman first and a politician and a member of this parliament afterwards.”

That is fine, but it is not where we are today and it is not where we will be in 2011, 2012, 2013 or 2016 as we debate and acknowledge what

happened in past centuries. We should reflect on what has happened. The gun, which, as Alban Maginness said, James Craig played a significant part in reintroducing to Irish politics, has proven to have failed Ireland. There are guns on all sides of our communities that lie dormant today, having failed to achieve in any way what they set out to achieve. This House, which was built to reflect Craig's immortal words, actually stands for pretty much the opposite of what was intended. The question, as I said at the outset, is whether we are to acknowledge the lessons of history and refuse stubbornly to repeat them and to use the weeks ahead not to commemorate people who may deserve it but to do what we should be doing today: debating a Budget and putting bread on tables.

Mr Storey: If that Budget is agreed, and I accept the Member's point about the seriousness of the situation, will his party at least be honourably responsible and be unanimous this time, instead of repeating the situation that we had when we last had a Budget, when the SDLP Minister voted one way in the Executive and the party then voted another way?

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

Mr McDevitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am glad that we have been able to debate the Budget. The SDLP will support a Budget that is right for this region: one that is capable of understanding that the levels of social deprivation and exclusion are still unacceptable; that child poverty is too pervasive; that our jobs strategy is failing us —

Mr Speaker: Order. *[Laughter.]* I often say in the House that even interventions should very much relate to the motion. I also remind the Member who has the Floor to stick to the motion, and I remind him not to go into the Budget.

Mr Storey: A simple yes or no would have done.

Mr McDevitt: Maybe.

I will draw my remarks to a close. The key lesson for us all is that we can genuinely use the coming weeks, months and years to acknowledge the great opportunity that exists for a new Ireland that is beyond Craigavon or Pearse —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Sir James Craig, who was Northern

Ireland's first Prime Minister, spent almost half of his political career opposing home rule and the remainder of his political life as the premier of a home rule Administration here in Ulster. As has been said, Craig was born in Sydenham in east Belfast on 8 January 1871, which was the year after Isaac Butt launched the home rule movement. He was the sixth son of James Craig, a millionaire Presbyterian whiskey distiller, and Eleanor Gilmour Brown. Both parents were of Scottish descent, and he was educated Merchiston Castle School, which is a Church of Scotland foundation in Edinburgh. He was, as my colleague Jonathan Craig said, a true Ulster Scot.

Craig became a stockbroker, but his heart was not in the buying and selling of shares. He jumped at the opportunity to serve in the South African or Boer war, and he returned to Ulster. He proved to be a good and popular officer, and, as deputy assistant director of the Imperial Military Railways, he exhibited the organisational flair that he would place at the disposal of the unionist cause in years to come. The war also gave him a heightened appreciation of the importance of the Empire and Ulster's place in it.

Before the Boer war, Craig had briefly been the honorary secretary of the Belfast Conservative Association, but his interest in politics was renewed when his brother Charles was elected as MP for South Antrim in a by-election. A month later, Craig contested an unexpected vacancy in North Fermanagh, but he was narrowly defeated by a Russellite land candidate. The Russellite candidate won by polling the full nationalist electorate in the constituency and by securing a tiny section of the unionist vote. That experience may have exerted a disproportionate influence on Craig's later political career. As unionist leader, Craig feared division in the unionist community and sought to preserve unity at almost any price. That is a lesson that those on these Benches should learn today.

Craig entered Parliament in the 1906 general election as MP for East Down, defeating the sitting Russellite MP. Craig proved an energetic parliamentarian, taking a keen interest in social and education issues, particularly in respect of teachers and their salaries, and, of course, in Army reform. As the third home rule crisis unfolded in 1910, Craig forged an effective working relationship with Sir Edward Carson to mobilise Ulster unionist resistance. In the words of biographer St John Ervine, each had what the other lacked, and by pooling their resources they

became a third, and undeniable, person: effective apart, they were irresistible together. Carson brought his charisma and great powers of advocacy to the unionist cause, while Sir James Craig brought his formidable organisational skills, which Carson lacked, and provided the constant reassurance that Carson needed.

1.00 pm

Recognising the outstanding skill set that Carson would bring to the unionist cause, Craig suggested at the beginning of 1910 that unionist MPs should invite Carson to become their leader. That point was evidenced by Lord Leitrim's letter to Mrs Craig, in which he observed that it was "certainly a capital idea of your husband's, getting Carson to lead us".

Craig reassured Carson that Ulster unionists meant to resist home rule. To underscore his point, Craig organised the great demonstration on 23 September 1911 at his home, Craigavon, on the outskirts of Belfast, at which Carson was introduced to the people whom he would lead for the next decade. Craig masterminded the unionist campaign. Carson provided the speeches, Craig the organisation.

Craig organised the Balmoral demonstration on Easter Tuesday 1912 and the pre-covenant demonstrations in September 1912. Originally, Craig was deputed to draft the text of the covenant, but, ultimately, that duty fell to Thomas Sinclair, then Ulster's leading liberal unionist and a Presbyterian layman, who was a superb wordsmith. However, Craig choreographed the signing of the Ulster Covenant.

In January 1913, he was disproportionately responsible for the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force. Craig was also to the forefront in establishing the provisional Government in July 1914, after which Carson candidly admitted that it was James Craig who did most of the work, while Carson got most of the credit.

At the outbreak of the Great War, Craig recruited and organised the 36th (Ulster) Division. He became a lieutenant colonel and the new division's assistant adjutant and Quartermaster General. In the years after the war, he sacrificed a promising political career in London.

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

Mr Humphrey: — to become Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, a position that he held until

his death. Although Craig, Mr Speaker, was an important opponent —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Humphrey: — of home rule —

Mr Speaker: I must insist that your time is up.

Mr Humphrey: — and spent almost half of his political career opposing it, he went on to represent Ulster in this Parliament, as its Prime Minister, and, subsequently, in the House of Lords.

Mr Bresland: I am honoured to speak in support of the motion and to pay tribute to that great Ulsterman, Lord Craigavon. I agree with what has been said so far by all of my colleagues. As Northern Ireland moves forward, it is always important to look back and to remember the past. We can learn from it, and it is good to honour the memory of those who played their part in their day and generation. So much has changed in the 70 years since the passing of Lord Craigavon that I wonder what he would think if he was with us today. In some ways, he would hardly recognise the place, because so much has changed in the past few years, never mind the last 70.

Yet, perhaps, he might have recognised some things, and I think that he would be happy with much of what he would see. We are meeting in the Building that he knew so well and in which he served. The Union that he loved and wanted to maintain is still intact. The Union flag still flies over Stormont. The Northern Ireland that he helped to create is at peace. It is more stable than ever and has a bright future based on sharing and partnership. Craigavon would have been happy with that. It was his desire that all people — Protestant and Roman Catholic, unionist and nationalist — could live together in peace, harmony and prosperity.

James Craig was born not far from here, in Sydenham, in 1871. It is said that leaders are made not born, but I think that great leaders are born leaders, and James Craig was one of those. He showed those leadership skills in business and in the British Army, in which he served with distinction during the Boer war. However, he really came into his own as the leader of unionism in the days of the home rule crisis. Along with Edward Carson and others, he set an example by showing courage and dedication to the cause, and, when the rest of Ireland broke away, he played his part in setting

up the new state of Northern Ireland, becoming our first Prime Minister. In so many ways, those were violent and very difficult days, but, yet again, Craigavon led by example.

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

I know that Craigavon is not held in very high esteem by some inside and outside the House. Everyone is entitled to their view. However, I think that Craigavon has been treated unfairly by those who regard him as an example of bigotry and hatred. He was without doubt a staunch and determined Protestant in the tradition that goes back to the Apprentice Boys of Derry. He was prepared to stand firm for what he believed in and to do what he could to make sure that the unionist cause was defended and preserved. However, he was no bigot; he was a true Protestant, because he believed in civil and religious liberty for all.

He had a very generous spirit, which friends and enemies referred to at the time of his sudden death. It was said that his rugged sincerity compelled admiration even from those who disagreed with him. Lord Craigavon was a big man in every sense of the word, and in these days when truth and honesty are regarded as cheap, we would do well to learn from him. We must do all that we can to make sure that Craigavon House in east Belfast is preserved in honour of his memory. The building is a vital piece of Irish history, so it must not be lost. I support the motion.

Mr S Anderson: This autumn marks two very important anniversaries in Ulster's history. We remember the passing of two great men: Edward Carson and James Craig, the key founding fathers of Northern Ireland. Those two men came from very different backgrounds and parts of Ireland, but they were bonded by a determination to preserve the union.

Edward Carson died 75 years ago, on 22 October 1935. I was glad to see that that anniversary was marked by a panel discussion in Queen's University last month as part of the Belfast Festival. James Craig, or Lord Craigavon, was Carson's right-hand man and a chief mourner at his state funeral through the streets of Belfast. Lord Craigavon was to survive his good friend by five years. He died 70 years ago this Wednesday, on 24 November 1940, at the age of 69, while still serving as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

As that important anniversary approaches, I am glad to have the opportunity to pay tribute to one of Ulster's greatest sons. I congratulate my party colleagues for securing the debate, and I needed no encouragement to rise to my feet this afternoon. Craigavon is one of my heroes, and, like some of my colleagues, I also have the privilege of serving on the borough council named after him.

It would take a lot longer than my allocated five minutes to pay proper tribute to Lord Craigavon. He personified the Ulster spirit in so many ways. He was a man of principle who was straight, honest and open in all his dealings; a true Ulster Presbyterian, and I say that as an Anglican. He called a spade a spade. He was a man of grit and determination, and he was an inspiration to Ulster in her days of crisis over home rule and in the early days of partition. When the Second World War broke out, just a year or so before he died, he was an inspiration to the nation. He knew when to stand his ground, but he also knew when to make the all-important move for the greater good. I am convinced that, although he would have had some concerns, just as many of us had, Craigavon would have supported the current devolved arrangements that we have at Stormont.

He was also an entrepreneur. He was one of those unionist businessmen who helped to develop our manufacturing base, thus ensuring that the new state of Northern Ireland was placed on a sound economic footing. On those grounds alone, we could do with him today.

It is both fitting and hugely symbolic that we meet here in Parliament Buildings at Stormont. Craigavon once walked its corridors and did business in its rooms. He was Ulster's first Prime Minister, a post he held for 19 years. He and his wife are buried near the East Door of Parliament Buildings and his illustrious presence is still felt in this place.

In the words of John Andrews, who became Prime Minister immediately after him, Craigavon was a great Ulsterman and a great Irishman, and we salute his memory. Of course, there are those in this House who are not unionists and take a different view, and we have heard from them today. They have their own perspective on Craigavon and on the formation of Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way on that particular point and for acknowledging that fact. History records a different view of

some of Lord Craigavon's decisions and actions, not least the formation of the B-Specials, which were disbanded in disgrace when Stormont fell in the early 1970s.

Mr S Anderson: That may be the Member's personal view, but it is not the view of the Ulster people. Those men stood when they needed to be counted to defend this country when it was coming under severe attack by republican sources. We cannot discredit their name in any way with comments like that. We heard some comments today from Members who only want to discredit the memory of Lord Craigavon.

Those who were among his most bitter opponents also respected him for his fairness, integrity, honesty, dignity and courtesy. In the Stormont Parliament a day or so after Craigavon's death, the nationalist MP for Belfast Central, T J Campbell, told how, six years previously, Craigavon had paid tribute to Joe Devlin MP. Mr Campbell said:

"An Ulster Unionist paid tribute to an Ulster Nationalist; to-day, may an Ulster Nationalist salute the memory of the man who just passed on to the shadowy land?"

As has already been said, the motion merely asks the House to note the anniversary of Craigavon's death. I trust that Members will have no difficulty in doing just that. I hope that we will all agree. I support the motion.

Mr Bell: It is a privilege for those of us who would not be fit to lace the shoes of men of the stature of Viscount Craigavon to speak, as this Wednesday we look towards the anniversary of his death and celebrate all that he achieved. Sydney Anderson, the MLA for Upper Bann, told us of the accolades that Craigavon received from nationalists of his day. If only nationalists of today would spend their time listening to the way in which their predecessors — of substantially greater stature than some here today — paid tribute to Craigavon, they would realise the true greatness of the man.

There are a lot of similarities. As a proud former Mayor of Craigavon, I congratulate the current mayor for securing the debate. Craigavon was born in Sydenham in Belfast, where I grew up. He shares the same birthday as my wife, born on 8 January 1871. *[Laughter.]* It is important to listen to the whole sentence; only the year, 1871, is different. Therefore, I have double reasons to celebrate every 8 January.

When anyone looks at the economy as it is today, particularly south of the border, they would be delighted to have a man of the financial intelligence and capacity of Viscount Craigavon, Sir James Craig. Not only did he develop his business as a stockbroker, he managed to run that business.

However, business was not his first calling. He had his knowledge of duty, and, in 1900, he went off, as a captain, to the Boer war and spent time as a prisoner there. He came into his own, as it were, between 1912 and 1914, when, cometh the hour, cometh the man. He led a resistance that has, over decades, been seen to be hugely successful, because here we have our Northern Ireland firmly enshrined in our United Kingdom, with all the democracies flowing down from the Mother of Parliaments.

1.15 pm

Many people refer, rightly, to his distinguished history of leadership in the 19 years between 1921 and 1940, and, although some will try to introduce a discordant note into those years, they should look to the numbers of people who came from South of the border into Northern Ireland during the years of Viscount Craigavon's leadership. Those people came here because of the prosperity, stability and employment that he was instrumental in leading. Many nationalists came North from South of the border because of the brilliance of the man's leadership.

Many people do not realise that, between 1906 and 1921, he had a distinguished career in the House of Commons. He was a junior Minister in the Ministry that dealt with pensions, and he served in the Admiralty. If he wanted, for purely selfish ends, he could have had a hugely distinguished career in the House of Commons, but he saw where leadership was required, and he sacrificed that career in the House of Commons to come here to show leadership. We pay tribute to that leadership and that sacrifice on the seventieth anniversary of his death.

He was a hugely intelligent man. He was awarded honorary degrees not only from Queen's University in 1922 but from the University of Oxford in 1926. He made some significant contributions. In those days, to appear on the front page of 'Time' magazine was a matter of considerable significance, and, on 26 May 1924, Sir James Craig appeared on the front page of 'Time' magazine, three weeks after Pope Pius XI also appeared on the front

page. He showed leadership in the House of Commons, as a junior pensions Minister, in the Admiralty and in his leadership of the resistance here between 1912 and 1914, and he was prepared to sacrifice business interest to serve his country. Taking all that in the round, there is no doubt that he was a person of greatness, and it is significant of the House's maturity that we can celebrate one of our finest sons.

Mr Frew: I have great pleasure in speaking to this motion on a great man, and I welcome the chance to speak. Whenever I drive past Carson's statue or walk past Lord Craigavon's statue, which was made by Merrifield, in the stairs in the Great Hall, not a day goes by without my realising the privilege of representing North Antrim in the Assembly and realising the history of this Building, our country and what it has been through. How fitting is it that Lord Craigavon's statue overlooks proceedings in this Building, which is a Building and a Parliament that he built and established?

It is quite right and proper that we should mark the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of his death by remembering the man he was and by raising awareness of the great man. More could be done to enhance the man's memory through the official tour of Stormont. It would be in the population's interest to learn much more about the man and the history of this place and the times in which it was built. It is fitting that, on his death, Lord Carson was buried in St Anne's Cathedral. How much more fitting is it that Stormont is the site of the burial ground of our first Prime Minister, Lord Craigavon? He was a colossus of Stormont, a giant of a man in a time of giants.

If Lord Carson's leadership was indispensable in giving unionists a powerful voice in Great Britain, Lord Craigavon's organisational skills, discipline, military experience and personality were vital in enabling him to maintain the unity and the mobilisation of the Ulster people at a time of crisis. That crisis came about, of course, because of the home rule Bill and the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. The Ulster Volunteer Force then became the 36th (Ulster) Division and led the way for Ulster's proudest yet most dire moments in the pages of history when it won undying glory in France.

Lord Craigavon was not only leader and Prime Minister of our country: he constructed it. He faced a task of great difficulty. James Craig

was an experienced politician but the men around him were not, so his Government had little experience. A new police force had to be brought into being and order established. He sought to establish a non-sectarian, integrated education system, but the Roman Catholic hierarchy rose up against that attempt. It is funny how history repeats itself, and I am sure that that point will not be lost on my colleague from North Antrim, the Chairperson of the Education Committee.

Slowly but surely, Lord Craigavon brought the tiny state of Northern Ireland into a state of strength and resolve, reflecting the character of its people. He was a man of undaunted courage, high character and sound judgement, and his powers of leadership and organisation were second to none. He served in South Africa with the 3rd battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles, in which the modern day Royal Irish Regiment has its roots. However, it is the funny and quirky stories about this great man that stick in my head.

James Craig was colour-blind. He discovered that he could not distinguish between red and green, which also meant that he could hardly distinguish between orange and green. Also during the Boer war, he proved a good and popular officer and a true soldier to his men, as has already been mentioned by the Member for East Belfast. Taken prisoner by the Boers, he elected to march with his men instead of riding with the other officers to the prison camp, which was 200 miles away. Our people, especially our children, should learn those stories and many more in history class at school. When I was at school, we learned about world and UK history, such as the Spanish Armada, Guy Fawkes, the Battle of Hastings and the great fire of London. However, I learned about Craigavon, Carson and the formation of Northern Ireland at home, not at school.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Frew: I believe that that should be taught in schools, to give everybody the opportunity to judge that great man.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr George Robinson. Mr Robinson, I am sorry but, because of time constraints, you have two minutes.

Mr G Robinson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

There are few people in any country's history who have earned the respect of their contemporaries and successors as Lord Craigavon has done in Northern Ireland. I am sure that he still watches over deliberations from a tomb not far from here. As Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, he worked so hard in that role that he pushed himself into poor health and, undoubtedly, an early grave.

The Northern Ireland Prime Minister at the time of Lord Craigavon's death, Mr Andrews, stated:

"James Craig was a man whose life was devoted, with singleness of purpose, to the service of the state."

The warmth towards Lord Craigavon was from all sides of the political spectrum. Indeed, one Member, Mr Beattie, stated that Lord Craigavon would engage:

"...in a homely way in a friendly conversation."

The leader of the Senate at the time, Mr Robb, said that Craigavon had staunchness in his danger and calmness in days of excitement, which made him a tower of strength that resulted in his opponents giving him respect and admiration.

That respect and admiration from across the Parliament of that time was marked in the most prestigious way, with Lord Craigavon having his final resting place in the confines of this estate. That alone shows the hugely significant and lasting part that Lord Craigavon played in Northern Ireland's history. The purpose of this debate is to pay our respects to a man who was a giant physically and historically and to remember with gratitude the role that Lord Craigavon played.

I have, within two minutes, explained why I support the motion. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, Mr Robinson.

Mr Campbell: Mr Robinson is to be commended for finishing his remarks so expeditiously.

The debate was very wide-ranging. Its significance should not be underestimated, and it is testimony to every Member who took part that, despite the variety and range of opinions offered, there was at least recognition across the Chamber that this is an event of no little significance and that Lord Craigavon was a man of comprehensive stature throughout not just Northern Ireland and Ireland but the western

world. As Mr Jonathan Bell said, Lord Craigavon featured on the front page of 'Time' magazine.

Quite a number of Members contributed to the debate. Unfortunately, instead of trying to remember history, a small number of Members seemed determined to rewrite it. However, such is the nature of the events that we are in that it was almost inevitable that that would be the case.

Mr Mervyn Storey moved the motion, and I apologise for not being present for all his comments. In doing so, he comprehensively dealt with the famous quote that is probably used to caricature Lord Craigavon more so than any other contribution or speech that he made or any of his endeavours. Mr Storey put that quote in its proper context in that it was a response to earlier comments made. If this debate does nothing but illuminate that fact in the minds of everyone in Northern Ireland, it will have been time well spent.

Mr O'Dowd referred to the importance of the issue but said that there were other matters and subjects that we should be discussing, and he outlined a number of those. We could have taken that more seriously if his party, only last month, had not tabled a debate on an Irish language strategy, which is, many people would say, in the grand scheme of things, pretty small beer compared with what people are faced with at the moment. Nonetheless, he made that comment.

Tom Elliott was, as fourteenth leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, glad to support the motion and the thoughts behind it. Mr Elliott was one of a number of Members — including Mr Trevor Lunn, Mr Jonathan Craig and Sir Reg Empey — who outlined, in a variety of fashions, a potted history of James Craig, later Lord Craigavon. Mr Craig also indicated that he was the only Craig remaining in the Chamber. I will leave Members to judge whether that is a good or a bad thing. Sir Reg Empey made the relevant point that the Craigavon tomb should be included in tours of the Building.

In his inimitable fashion, William Humphrey made a significant job of giving a potted history of Lord Craigavon. Sydney Anderson and Stephen Moutray did likewise, both of whom come, of course, from the area that is named after Craigavon himself. They were, therefore, able to take a very localised and personalised approach to the debate.

I have already mentioned Jonathan Bell. He gave a further potted history and mentioned the birthdate of Lord Craigavon. I am sure that Mr Bell's wife will forgive him and accept that no reference whatsoever was made to her vintage. It is purely the day and month of her birthdate that she shares with Lord Craigavon.

Paul Frew outlined a very comprehensive potted history, including information that I was not aware of about the colour blindness of Lord Craigavon. He added to the colour of the debate, if I can say that.

Alban Maginness is not here at present. He made reference to the possibility of an all-party basis on which to commemorate this type of event.

1.30 pm

That is an interesting proposition, and I am sure that it will be considered if he puts it forward. I do not caution against it, but I hope that any all-party basis that might be considered would not dilute or diminish the importance of the individual subject matter to be commemorated.

Alban Maginness, a Member for North Belfast, also indicated that the nineteenth century was a period of relative peace in Ireland, and that it was James Craig who was responsible for reintroducing armed force into the politics of Ireland. I do not know where he got that from, but we must all remember the context in which Craig came into politics: it was the result of the home rule Bill. During Mr Lunn's contribution, Mr Maginness made an intervention in which he alluded to the sectarian debate about whether there should be a nine-county Ulster or a six-county Ulster. However, does anyone look at the other side of the coin and ask whether there would be a distinct difference in the demographic religious make-up of a 23-county Republic or a 26-county Republic? It would still have been overwhelmingly Catholic, and no one seriously suggests that whatever option was chosen would have made any difference whatsoever to the religious composition of that nation state and how it might affect its political future.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: Will I get an extra minute?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No.

Mr Campbell: Then I am not giving way.
[Laughter.]

I have dealt comprehensively with Alban Maginness's attempt to rewrite history. The honourable Member for South Belfast Conall McDevitt indicated that he was glad and content to acknowledge the history in the matter before us today. However, after an intervention or two from his SDLP colleagues, he appeared reticent to concede the greatness of the man. Craig was a man of his time, and when we talk about the historical importance of any figure or group of figures, we must always remember that they were people of their time. To try to apply the context and rationale of the twenty-first century to events that happened over 100 years ago, as Craig was unfolding his vision for the future, simply does not work. We have to try to work in the context of what happened at the time and of why those events occurred.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: No, I will not give way. If I do not get an extra minute, I will not give way.

Mr Bresland talked about the political reality of today and how much of it was due to the early work of Lord Craigavon. Mr Lunn gave a potted history of Lord Craigavon and accurately outlined the fact that although some people may have different opinions of him, there is no doubting the extent and importance of his contribution.

We have spent a little time today remembering and outlining the significance of this giant figure. In our political future, we would do well to learn the lessons of the past to ensure that the failures are not repeated and the successes are recalled.

Lord Bannside: There is one thing that has been missed, which is the fact that the remains of the great man whom we have been talking about still carry the same message. I do not take people around the Building without showing them the marks on the floor where his monument stands. Certain evil people came into the House before I was a Member and tried to throw him down the stairs, but he still said "not an inch."

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Campbell: That was a point of order. *[Laughter.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the seventieth anniversary of the death of Lord Craigavon, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

Domiciliary Care

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

Ms M Anderson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the challenges posed by the changing demographics; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that there is adequate investment in domiciliary care to meet the current and future needs of an ageing population.

Go raibh míle maith agat. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

Last week, we discussed the Commissioner for Older People Bill, which passed its Consideration Stage. That Bill was shaped by the sector and was welcomed by all, because it tackled the issues that older people face. Those issues are multidimensional and cover, as was discussed last week, discrimination, breaches of rights, poor practice, lack of attention and, of course, inadequate domiciliary care packages or home care packages, which impact on all the other areas.

Over recent months, my office has been inundated with constituents whose domiciliary care packages are being reduced or, in some cases, taken away altogether. That is not the fault of care workers, who, I know from personal experience, do a wonderful job. I rely on carers for my mother, so I know only too well that the packages are an absolute lifeline for many families, and they must be protected. The half an hour in the morning or afternoon or whatever one may receive or need makes all the difference to the quality of life of the individual concerned and his or her entire family.

The intended shift was towards a domiciliary care setting, as stated in the 'People First' policy document, which was produced over 20 years ago. However, when the Public Accounts Committee investigated the matter 18 years later, in 2008, it found that older people with care needs continued to be treated in an institutional setting rather than at home. Those who want to remain independent in their own homes and stay in control of their own lives for as long as possible often have to fight

the system every step of the way to get the provision that they need, the services that they require and their rights guaranteed.

We have been told today that, for those who require institutional care or nursing home facilities, the Western Trust will be allocating only two places a month. That is an absolute scandal. The 'People First' document committed the Health Department to transforming the health system for older people from one dominated by residential provision to one that would offer the kind of flexibility and sufficiency to support older people so that they can remain in their homes as long as possible.

However, we have learned today about the nursing home places, and that is of grave concern to every Member. As MLAs, all of us can cite cases in which we have had to fight to get a package in place to allow someone to remain independent or to get someone discharged from hospital. As I said, two years ago, the Public Accounts Committee stated that the discharge of older people from general hospital often causes problems for the domiciliary or home care packages process, principally due to differences of opinion between the individual and professionals and between the relatives and carers on the appropriateness of the package needed for the older person in order for him or her to return home. However, it stressed the importance of more careful planning of discharges to ensure that the appropriate package is available as and when it is needed.

As we debate the matter as MLAs here in the Chamber, a meeting at Altnagelvin Hospital later this afternoon will discuss the case of an 87-year-old Derry woman with leg ulcers and poor mobility. The carer who was attending to the woman before she was hospitalised four weeks ago was not able to shower or toilet her properly because an additional carer was required to assist her in those tasks. Despite the health and safety risk, occupational therapy stated that the lady did not require two carers. That 87-year-old's discharge from hospital has been delayed for weeks because the issue remains unresolved. On Friday, that elderly lady was moved from Altnagelvin to the Waterside Hospital. As yet, the family wait and have to fight for her much-needed care package.

That human story is what today's debate is about. Elizabeth is 87 years of age and has two elderly sisters, who are 89 and 90 years old. All

three live in the same home. Both her sisters have dementia, and all three are able to live at home only with the assistance of their ageing nieces and family members, some of whom are older people.

The Health Department's policy is that older people should remain in their homes. Therefore, the contribution of informal carers, such as family members, and the views of those who provide the vast bulk of the caring — in this case, the three elderly ladies' extended families — and of the home carers should be taken into account when establishing Elizabeth's discharge needs.

A few weeks ago, I raised that point with the Minister in the Chamber. He confirmed that 11 people from across the North were not discharged from hospital or institutional care on that day. Perhaps that was the position on that day, but many have found themselves experiencing the same difficulty when trying to get a care package in place. To get an adequate care package in place, many people have had to rely on tired, emotionally stressed and often elderly relatives to confront and challenge the system.

Anyone can tell us that that is a false economy. It costs significantly more to keep someone in hospital, never mind the issue of bed blocking, than to pay for one hour of home care throughout the day, which amounts to less than £20. We are told that, depending on the ward, it can cost between £300 and £600 a day to keep a person in hospital.

In recent years, however, there has been a tightening of the eligibility criteria for domiciliary care, which has restricted access to care and support. Low-level services, such as home helps and meals on wheels, have been withdrawn. Evidence suggests that a reduction in the provision of social care can have the knock-on effect of increasing demand for other health services, especially emergency care.

Earlier this year, I met the commissioner to raise the problem of domiciliary care in the city of Derry. The commissioner accepted that the Western Trust faced a major shortfall in the domiciliary care budget, which is leading to severe difficulties in the service. There was a suggestion then that steps would be taken to secure additional funds. Perhaps the Minister will be able to tell Members whether such steps have been taken, because the evidence on the ground suggests that that is not the case.

The Minister indicated that he would take on board my concerns about domiciliary care when I raised them a few weeks ago. I greatly welcomed his comments at that time, and I wrote to him formally afterwards. Again, perhaps the Minister will update us.

A few weeks ago, I met representatives of the Western Trust for the third time in a number of months to discuss the issue. It was clear from our discussion that we face an ageing population boom that will require significant investment, now and in the future, to meet its needs.

1.45 pm

According to the census, in the past decade, there has been an increase of almost 30% in the number of people who are aged over 65 in the Western Trust area. By 2017, that number is expected to rise by 50%, while the number of people who are aged over 85 is expected to increase by more than 80%. That is a massive challenge for our health providers.

Given that the Western Trust already spends £20 million of its £400 million budget on domiciliary home care packages, it is clear that more resources will be needed to provide the standard of care that an ageing population will require and is entitled to. However, the Public Accounts Committee said that, despite that, allocated funding was significantly out of line with population trends across the North. However, the Department does not seem to have taken account of that aspect of the Public Accounts Committee report. Perhaps the Minister can tell us more about that.

Making the shift towards social care and prevention requires long-term political commitment and a fundamental shift in how the Health Service works. Although that may be a task, or even an opportunity, for a future Health Minister, current domiciliary care provision must support older people with dignity and enable them to live their lives independently and as they choose. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Alex Easton, I remind Members not to use BlackBerrys in the Chamber, as they interfere with the equipment.

Mr Easton: I support the motion and thank Members for bringing it forward. I start by paying tribute to the staff responsible for domiciliary care across Northern Ireland. They have helped many families to keep their loved ones at

home. Had it not been for domiciliary care, my grandparents would not have been able to spend their last days and weeks at home in the comfort of their loved ones. I also thank the Minister because I know that domiciliary care is dear to his heart and that he has been putting increased resources into it.

Projections suggest that Northern Ireland's population is increasing and that the older population is notably on the rise. It is estimated that by 2014, the number of people who are aged 64 and under will increase by about 20,827 or 1.4%, and, by 2020, that figure will have increased by 44,846 or 2.9%. Population projections predict a much sharper rise in people who are aged 65 and over. It is estimated that by 2014, the number of people who are aged 65 and over will increase by 27,800 or 10.7%, and, by 2020, that figure will have increased by 69,000 or 26%. It is predicted that by 2030, one in five old people will be of pension age, and one in 10 people will be aged 75 and over.

Those statistics are worrying, and it is clear that more demand for domiciliary care will be placed on our Health Service. As we get older, our health needs become more demanding. With the advancement of preventative medicines and of our standard of living, we are living longer. That will have a major effect on our Health Service.

At present, health and social care trusts carry out care management assessments, and when domiciliary care is identified as the best form of target, trusts organise its delivery either by a statutory provider or by contracting an independent provider.

Statistics show that more than 80% of people in receipt of our home-help service in Northern Ireland are in the elderly care programme. In 1990, the Government published a document entitled 'People First', which laid out the Department's vision for community care. That essentially piggybacked on the Thatcherite idea of closing down institutions and providing care in the community, which was primarily about money and resources but seemed to be better for the patient.

Demand on domiciliary care has risen, as has the funding, which increased by 40% in the four years from 2003 to 2006. Before community care was rolled out across the United Kingdom, I would be interested in seeing how much it cost to provide care in residential and nursing

homes in comparison to community care packages. Was it more costly, and how much more money was invested in the care of our elderly population during that period compared to now? I understand that, in many ways, community care packages are better for people, as they allow them to live in their own home or a family member's home with a certain degree of independence. However, I am interested to know the difference in the level of investment between then and now and to know whether people who needed care were better treated. I am happy to support the motion.

Mr McCallister: In common with other Members, I support the motion. It took Ms Anderson some time in proposing the motion to get to the issue of demographics.

There are several aspects to the motion. Mr Easton outlined, as I am sure that other Members will, that, when we look at the demographics, there is no doubt that the need for domiciliary care is rising. It could rise by as much as 22% in the next 20 to 30 years. That is a huge and challenging rise in figures. As medicine improves and investment is made to address health inequalities that blight some communities, that will, of course, put more strain on budgets for domiciliary care.

I pay tribute to those who provide care and who, at times, do a difficult job. I also want to pay tribute to carers, whose inclusion in the motion may have been overlooked. They look after loved ones and family members out of a sense of duty, with no reward. It is important that they are always remembered. It is important that we remember the old saying, "Who cares for the carers?"

The changing demographics are startling. It is often understated in health debates and others in the Assembly and must, therefore, be pointed out that the Health Department is the only Department that has completed its obligations under the review of public administration. That might not sound terribly glamorous. Some people might ask what that has to do with domiciliary care. It is vital in the delivery of domiciliary care that the number of trusts has been reduced to five.

More importantly, in facing those demographic changes, Northern Ireland is the only region to have a dedicated Public Health Agency. That makes a huge difference. As we go forward, it will make a huge difference to people's lives. It will help to keep them healthier, fitter and out of

long-term care for longer periods. Looking after people's health for longer will help to fend off the stresses that changing demographics put on the budget.

As the Minister has said previously, a person uses the Health Service most during the early years and the last 10 years of his or her life. That is when there are big challenges. The Public Health Agency has a key role to address the pressures that arise from the demographics that are mentioned in the motion.

If one looks at current need, there are differences in waiting lists for domiciliary care in some trust areas. Pressures have arisen due to changing demographics in the two trusts that cover my constituency, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Certainly, demographics in the South Eastern Trust area are changing at an alarming rate. Budget pressures will arise from that.

There have been reports that Sinn Féin is, perhaps, delaying or refusing to come to a Budget agreement. I am pleased that it now seems to be moving towards signing up to protecting health and ring-fencing health funds. However, there is concern that although we may have seen movement to protect health recently, there must also be movement to protect social care, in which domiciliary care fits firmly. We must see protection of services. We cannot come to the Chamber and call constantly for investment in various services in different parts of Northern Ireland unless we actually vote for that when we get the opportunity in Budget debates or support, campaign and lobby for it in the Budget process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McCallister: That is something that we need to support.

I am happy to support the motion. I am pleased to welcome others to the cause of protecting health and social care in the Budget process.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion, and I thank the Members who have brought it to the House. The proposer has outlined the problem very well. She explained the difficulties faced in situations in which care is required for elderly people with complex needs and the non-availability of funding for that care.

The proposer shares the same trust area as me, which is the Western Trust. Approximately 45 beds in the three hospitals in that trust are occupied by elderly patients with complex needs. Most of them have been there for months. They should be in a more appropriate setting, such as a nursing home, but they cannot move because the funding is not available. I will look at the part of that arrangement that is very odd, particularly to the families of the people who are detained in those beds. It is costing at least £2,000 a week to keep them in hospital. As most Members know, it would cost less than £1,000 a week to accommodate them in a nursing home. There is an underutilisation of beds in nursing homes in the Western Trust. That is a real problem, and it does not fit well in the delivery of healthcare for the individuals concerned. Fourteen beds are blocked in that way in the local hospital in Enniskillen at a cost to the Health Service of £14,000 a week.

People come into our constituency offices and tell us that their home-help hours are being whittled away. There is a serious problem, and I hope that the Minister will take on board the extent of the problem in our area. I will quote from correspondence that I received recently. It states:

"I am writing to you following the way that you have profiled this issue in the local papers. I write to you out of desperation. My uncle is currently residing at the Erne Hospital. He is a bed-blocker, and he has been awaiting funding for a nursing home placement for several months. Due to the unsuitability of the acute care setting for his needs, his general health status has deteriorated exponentially, and his disease process has accelerated rapidly. It is my fear that he will be exposed to further infections and the risk of further deterioration and death in acute care, if he continues to be denied a nursing home place."

That is one of many examples.

I want to move on to some other problems around domiciliary care. I pay tribute to all the staff who work in that sector for their dedication and commitment. However, there is an inconsistency. It is a mix of statutory care and voluntary community providers, but there is a difference in the money that is paid to those healthcare workers. Generally, those in statutory care are on a higher rate, but, most importantly, travel expenses are available to them but not to the workers who do the same job but who work

for a local charity. We have several of those in the Fermanagh area. That is a problem that needs to be tackled.

In addition, there is the issue of tendering. The community and charitable organisations are being approached by large organisations who want to take them over.

As the Health Service moves towards tendering and value for money, those very good organisations that serve in local areas and which send out carers who know the patients and the area are likely to be taken over in the coming years by the larger organisations —

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

Mr Gallagher: — and the Health Service will lose out unless room is made for big and small care providers together.

2.00 pm

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion and acknowledge the progress made to date by the Health Department in providing domiciliary care to those who need it. However, I was very disappointed listening to Radio Ulster this morning to hear the stories from "west of the Bann" — I think that that is what they call it. I fully support the comments of Anne O'Reilly of Age NI, who said that need is greatest there.

Community care came about as a result of the 'People First' document published by the Department in the early 1990s. That document stressed the importance of keeping sick and elderly or disabled people in their own home for as long as possible. That policy would surely be supported by the vast majority of people, including those who need care. There will, of course, be some people who, for various reasons, prefer to be looked after in some sort of residential home but certainly not in a hospital for a long time.

'People First' identified methods of care in the community that would satisfy the many and varied needs of people requiring additional help and care outside homes or hospitals. Health boards would assess individual needs and provide care packages to meet the requirements and, at the same time, boards would make full use of any independent community care sector. I pay tribute to the good work carried out by those independent providers, such as Crossroads,

Praxis Care and others, which are all doing fantastic work in the community.

The term “bed blocking” was commonly used some time ago, although I have not heard it used much recently, which is a good sign. It came about as a result of new patients requiring hospital treatment, only to find that vital beds in the hospital were occupied by people, mainly elderly, who had had their treatment and who were ready for home but, because there were no suitable care packages available or in place, they had to remain in hospital; hence the term “bed blocking”. Fortunately, because of domiciliary provision, that situation has been reduced, certainly in my locality as far as I am aware, but it has not been entirely eradicated. It is because of that worry that we asked our Health Minister, who, I am glad to see, is here today, to listen and, hopefully, act on what Members are saying to ensure that the resources are in place so that there is no return to the bad old days.

Once again, I thank the Assembly Research and Library Service staff for their information pack. The volume of information, concerns and questions on this subject from other Members shows that every constituency has been affected and that each wishes to see investment provided for care in the community.

In conclusion, my constituents in Strangford will welcome the initiative, taken earlier this year, by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust along with Unison. They both said that they were committed to providing a high-quality, statutory domiciliary service that not only meets the needs of older people but ensures their independence in the trust area and that they recognised the crucial role of a highly trained, motivated, respected and satisfied workforce. I pay tribute to all those staff, whether private or public, for their dedication to duty and the satisfaction of clients because of their skills. Long may that continue.

Mr Girvan: I speak in favour of the motion as presented. Like many Members who spoke previously, I put on record my thanks to those domiciliary workers who go beyond the requirements of their jobs. On many occasions, they exceed the time allocated for doing that job for the elderly and work outside the time frame. That goes unrewarded financially. Those workers do not see the people who they look after as an opportunity for employment, they do more.

Many Members who spoke previously mentioned the increase in the number of elderly people. By 2020, it is said that there will be a 26% increase in the number of people aged over 65. It is necessary that we consider positively how we look after that vulnerable section of our community.

An aspect that creates concern was mentioned this morning on the radio. It involves, not those who are released from hospital and brought back into the community, but those who are not necessarily fit to go back into their own homes and who are not getting the funding package that allows them to live in residential homes. However, I appreciate that we are dealing with the domiciliary care aspect.

I come from a family that is getting no younger. It is important that we give consideration to the need for care and respect and the need to deal with people with some dignity. A number of people feel that their voices are not listened to. I, for one, want to be sure that that is not the case and that the funding does follow.

I want to see best use of the resource we have. In the period 2002-06, there was a marked increase in the funding of domiciliary care. Unfortunately, that funding did not always follow the patient. As was said this morning, costs exceed £2,000 per week — £2,100 is the minimum needed to keep someone in a hospital bed. “Bed blocking” and “delayed discharge” are two of the various terms used to describe this, but they all amount to the same thing. Unless the package is in place for the patient, he or she has to remain in hospital until that is dealt with.

It has been mentioned to me that a number of the workers involved in this service find travel between patients difficult. There are issues in relation to the time allowed for them to get from one home to another. Adequate time is not always allowed for or taken into account. That issue must be looked at.

We must look at ring-fencing some of the budget. We discussed ring-fencing health budgets and so on. There is a problem in that managers are very precious about their own budgets. They allow their budgets to be used for some areas but not to be transferred to others. In some cases, we need to make such assessments daily, as opposed to concluding that the year's supply of money has been spent and that the people in need of care will have

to stay in the hospital system, costing the Department a lot more money. That needs to be looked at.

I support the motion, and it is worthwhile to bring it to the Floor of the House. The Minister and his Department have taken domiciliary care into account and added some additional moneys for it in the past. I want to see that continue, but throwing money at the problem does not necessarily make a difference.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion. However, when I speak in debates on issues that particularly affect older people, I sometimes notice that it seems as though we are only paying lip service to their needs.

The document 'People First', when published in 1990, was hailed as a vision for community care. Twenty years later, most of the aims of that document have not been achieved. The debates on health and social care for older people do not appear to focus on the right of those people to live their lives with a proper degree of dignity. Our duty should be to enhance and improve the quality of the lives of our older population.

The debate on health and social care always seems to focus on the economic implications of an ageing population, rather than on notions of entitlements, rights and fairness. No one is denying that meeting the health needs of an ageing population has major financial implications for all Departments, not just the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, if affirmative action and support for older people in the community is not put in place, surely the costs will continue to increase and become far greater.

Demographic shifts bring economic and social challenges for health and social care policy. Here in the North, there are over 300,000 people of retirement age, making up 17% of the population. It is expected that, by 2030, that figure will have increased to 24%, and, by that stage, it is also expected that over 130,000 people over the age of 80 will be living here. With a growing number of older people perhaps living longer, some will have conditions such as arthritis or the effects of stroke or dementia that can seriously reduce their quality of life. To maintain their independence, they will become more reliant on appropriate social care and domiciliary services.

The area of social care is a very complex one, and it can often be a source of distress for many older people and their families. Reductions in the provision of social care can have the knock-on effect of increasing demand for other health services. In many instances, prevention is the key to the promotion of good health and to a reduction in health inequalities. However, that currently appears to be undermined by the tightening of eligibility criteria for domiciliary care, by restricting access to care and support and by the withdrawal of services such as home help, meals on wheels and so on. There have been reductions of nearly 20% in the provision of home-help services since 2005 and reductions of nearly 18% for meals on wheels since that time. We should be concentrating on the idea that the prevention of ill health is a way of controlling costs in health and social care. We need to put in place a shift in resources to give a higher priority to prevention. However, there is no real evidence that that is happening.

Whenever services are limited or restricted, it is older people who are disproportionately affected, as they are greater users of health and social care services. A lot of older people remain fit and healthy, but the risks of ill health and disability increase with age, and people have to access these services. Those who face ill health must be treated equitably. Older people who need domiciliary care should be treated with respect and should get the care that meets their particular needs.

I have come across two cases recently where stroke victims coming out of hospital needed an enhanced care package for a short period to ensure that they were able to settle back into the domestic environment. Unfortunately, that care package was not forthcoming and had to be negotiated and fought for. That increased the trauma and stress on patients and families, who simply asked for the help to which they were entitled.

Dignity, independence and choice must be put at the heart of the social care system here in the North. People need to be absolutely sure that they will be treated fairly and equally, that the care that they receive will be of the highest quality and that they will get information and advice that is absolutely clear. We also need to ensure that those who care for relatives and friends receive the help and support that they require. At this point, I pay tribute to those carers and the people who work for social

services, as they do a tremendous job that is often not fully recognised.

There is no doubt that resources can and should be used more effectively to promote the health and well-being of older people. Long-term political commitment is required in making the shift from treating illness to preventing it. A fundamental shift in how the Health Service works is also required. We need a fundamental and urgent review of social care here in the North.

2.15 pm

Mr Bell: I welcome the motion. It is a very prescient motion and it allows us to forearm ourselves, because we have been forewarned about the need in the future. Given that the elderly are the fastest growing population sector in the United Kingdom, making proper preparation now will help us to deal with future challenges. As has been said, if we fail to plan, we plan to fail. The motion allows us to take a serious look at what has happened.

I have a psychology background, and I sometimes get concerned about the language that is used in reference to our elderly population. They are referred to as bed-blockers. There may be technical reasons for that, but it is almost as if they, who have contributed a lifetime of service in tax and National Insurance contributions, are in some way a burden. It is pointed out, rightly, that the elderly population is the single biggest user of community social services, but the corollary of that is never pointed out: that the elderly people have paid the most for those services through a lifetime of, in many cases, industry and very hard work.

Sometimes we need to change the phraseology from a negative to a positive. It is a success of our Health Service that more people are living longer. That should be something that we celebrate. It is a particular success in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area that I represent. I pay tribute to the Minister and the staff, whether administrative or on the care side, who have more people in domiciliary care in 2010 than they had in 2009. The last figures that I could see, which were raised by Martina Anderson, were for August 2009. Of the 11 people who were in beds in hospitals, with the exception of one who had to remain confidential, 10 were in trust areas other than mine. That, in many cases, is tribute to the staff, who do not have infinite resources. Nobody does. I add my voice to those that say that every Department

should fight for its budget, but, at the end of the day, let us make sure that we have a Budget so that people can make adequate plans for the future.

In my trust area in Strangford, I see the careful work that is put in to administering what are finite resources. I see the care and dignity that is given to keeping people in their own homes, and I see the decorum and respect that professional Health Service staff give to our elderly population. They treat them in their elder years with the type of dignity and respect that they are due for a lifetime of service to this country and community.

We have to look towards the medium term and the increases that we will see by 2014 and 2020. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report noted the gradual improvement. In many ways, that is an encouragement to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to see whether we can act as a catalyst in some way to make that gradual improvement a better one. A report produced by Age Concern and Help the Aged, which are now Age Northern Ireland, raised the concern that domiciliary care was not proceeding as fast as it should. It said that 59% of the elder care population was still in residential and nursing home services. We are looking for an improvement.

There are plenty of nursing homes that provide an absolutely fantastic service. I was in Orchard Court, which is a residential facility in my constituency. I saw the care and dignity of people who have their own homes but live collectively and have a resource. It is not always the absolute perfect answer to say that there are people who should be cared for in residential homes, in nursing homes and at home. It is the proportions that we are talking about. There should be no sort of distinction of success.

I conclude by saying that this is not singly a problem —

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

Mr Bell: — for the Health Service. It is also an issue for housing and for community-based services.

Mr Gardiner: First, I pay tribute to all those workers who dedicate themselves to looking after our senior citizens, whom we so often refer to as “old-age pensioners”. That, at least, has

been the trend in the debate, and we should, of course, refer to them as “older people”. All those Health Service workers in that line of duty do a tremendous amount of work with tender loving care, for which I record my appreciation.

Older people are set to make up an increasing proportion of the population. Those aged 60 and above will account for 27% of the population in 20 years' time, compared with the present 19%. In 2007, the Audit Office noted that there were more than 266,000 older people living in Northern Ireland. In 2009, health and social care trusts delivered 6% more hours of domiciliary care than they did in 2008. In 2009, each client received an average of 10·1 hours of such care, compared with 9·4 hours in 2008. Make no mistake: none of that care is inexpensive. I am afraid that we are, once more, back into the territory in which political parties that are supposed to be part of the government of Northern Ireland have, on the one hand, demanded cuts in the Minister's budget and, on the other, have demanded that he spend more on some aspects of health and social services delivery — in this case, domiciliary services.

The rise in demand for different aspects of health service delivery is nothing new. In fact, the Minister is consistently asked to deliver budget savings despite a 12% rise in demand for hospital services this year, on top of last year's 9%. During the same period, the Minister received a real increase in funding of only 0·001%. In addition, he was told to save £113 million, even before the comprehensive spending review cuts came through.

Having put the debate in its context, I turn now to the real issues that having an ageing population places on the agenda. The average cost of domiciliary care for a patient from a health and social care trust is £13·09 an hour. The average daily cost of maintaining a patient in hospital is approximately £261 a day. This year, across Northern Ireland, only 17 patients could not have been discharged from hospital because of a lack of domiciliary care. The Department already spends £630 million on supporting older people in the community. That figure will be topped up by an additional £600 million in this comprehensive spending review period, during which we will cater for an additional 1,500 older people.

In conclusion, the false demarcation line that some people try to draw between what they

describe as “front line health services” and “social services” causes me concern. That is not how the system works on the ground. Care in the home for an elderly patient is a perfect example of how impossible it is to separate front line healthcare from aftercare. I support the motion, but I hope that the Members who tabled it get their thinking right.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the proposer for bringing the motion, which I support, to the House.

We live in a society in which some of our older people face daily challenges, be that for reasons of ill health, poverty, abuse in any form or lack of social contact. However, we cannot and should not tolerate such things, but to change them requires a change of mindset in society in general.

That is a difficult task for which, unfortunately, the House does not have sole responsibility. However, we have the power to enact the changes required by the motion, which should be laid not only at the door of the Health Minister but at that of the Finance Minister.

In Northern Ireland, 300,000 people, or 17% of the population, are of retirement age. Over the next 10 years, the figure is expected to rise by 26·8%, and, by 2030, that age group will account for 24% of the population. The greatest increase will be in the older old. The projected figure of 130,000 people in the 80-and-above bracket is astonishing but, nonetheless, reasonable, given the general trend over the past 10 years of people living longer. We should have been preparing for that scenario, because there is no correlation between living longer and staying active for longer. Indeed, the possibility of having a disability in older years is, unfortunately, an odds-on bet. Some older people are lucky to lead active lives; however, due to failing health, many cannot. The idea of domiciliary care has been around for a long time, although under many titles. The provision of social care has not advanced at the same rate as life expectancy. Hence, the familiar story that I and, I am sure, many other Members hear daily in our constituency offices, which is that demand well and truly outweighs supply.

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

In the hope that the House will do something about that, we will all reiterate the same facts and figures with which lobby groups and charities supply us. However, I shall give just

two examples, which I believe will make the case in point. Both are recent cases. The first involves a gentleman of 90 years of age, whose wife — who, incidentally, had looked after him — died some weeks ago. He was supported well by family and friends, but he needed someone for 30 minutes every morning and 30 minutes in the evening. To my horror, I was told that that could not happen. I thought that an hour a day was a very reasonable request for anyone to make, but I was told that he had to wait for a package to be handed in from someone else. When I asked what that really meant, they would not say it, but I did. I asked: “Are you telling me that someone has to die before this man can get one hour of care a day?” I then got a “Yes”, which really and truly horrified me. I had the shivers about it. Our social care system is like a conveyor belt, and it is not responsive in any shape or form.

I have quoted my second example in the Chamber before, and it involves a man suffering from Parkinson's disease, who was retained in hospital for 16 weeks because they could not get an outside carer package for him. His wife wanted him home desperately, and he wanted to go home, but he had to remain there for 16 weeks. Fancy the cost of that, when he could have been at home with a care package, which would have been much cheaper. To be exact, his release from hospital took 16 and a half weeks. Those are not the only cases of which I have experience, but I will quote only them.

No money, no staff, no help: full stop. That is my experience over the past 26 years. In my capacity as a public representative, over the years, I have found that no one wants to be away from home. People want to be at home with their loved ones, and, no matter how small their capacity for independence might be, they do not want to lose it. It costs less to allow people to go home with the appropriate assistance than to keep them in an acute setting or a care home over the long term, and it has proven to be better for patients emotionally and mentally.

Although I appreciate that we are in challenging financial times, it is our responsibility to ensure that the best is delivered for our people. Older people are one of the most vulnerable groups, so I urge the Minister to do all in his power to impress on the trusts the fact that social care must be prioritised, so that there are levels and benchmarks below which the standard of care

offered cannot fall. The care system should at least be human and should allow for dignity and respect, which need to be our watchwords when deploying social care, no matter how minor its application.

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

Mrs M Bradley: I congratulate those who provide care in the community in every way, because they willingly carry out work beyond that which they are expected to do, and they do it excellently. I support the motion.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1, 6 and 8 have been withdrawn.

Ships: Banríon Uladh

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has had any discussions with Ofcom or the coastguard prior to her decision to name the new fisheries protection vessel Banríon Uladh. (AQO 547/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I did not have discussions with either Ofcom or the Maritime and Coastguard Agency prior to naming the new fisheries protection vessel Banríon Uladh. However, I am aware that Ofcom does not have guidance on the naming of vessels. It regards the vessel name as cosmetic, because it does not serve as the unique identifier of vessels when making radio transmissions. The unique identifier is the call sign, which is allocated with the radio licence. That is what Ofcom advises is normally given when sending distress signals, along with other such information as may be relevant.

Mr Moutray: The Ofcom guidance for naming vessels is that the name should be clearly understood when operating over the radio. It is clear that the naming of the vessel fails that test. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that the naming of the vessel meets the requirement that employees have the right to a neutral environment free from intimidation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have looked at the variety of names of the vessels that are registered in the local fishing fleet. I do not believe that Banríon Uladh would create any more difficulties than some of the names that are already registered. I do not believe that the simple fact of naming the vessel in Irish is any kind of breach. Promoting good community relations and equality of treatment does not mean that

the name of the vessel should be in English. Indeed, the fishing industry is made up of people from all sectors of the community. I have also looked at the Equality Commission guidelines on promoting a good and harmonious working environment. Those guidelines state specifically:

"The use of languages other than English ... will not, in general, constitute an infringement of a good and harmonious working environment."

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister realise that when they force the Irish language on a community, she and Sinn Féin are in danger of creating division and hostility to that language, as well as, in this case, risking health and safety because people would have difficulty in pronouncing the name of the vessel?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not accept that. I believe that the name is very poetic. Banríon Uladh translates as "Queen of Ulster", and I felt that that was a very good name for a vessel that is under the aegis of my Department. I am more than happy to promote the Irish language and to enable other people to use it. There are other examples of Irish used in everyday scenarios that are helping to promote the use of the Irish language among people who do not necessarily speak it.

Mr P J Bradley: Can the Minister tell me whether Ofcom and the coastguard contributed to the purchase of the vessel? If so, will they also be expected to contribute to its maintenance, upkeep and general running?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: No. Part of the cost of the vessel is being recouped from the EU. A business case was put to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) through an EU-regulated procurement competition that Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) oversaw. Ofcom did not contribute to the purchase of the vessel. It was bought by my Department together with an amount of money from the EU.

A5 Western Transport Corridor

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment, from an agricultural perspective, of the proposed A5 western transport corridor. (AQO 548/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The proposed A5 scheme will clearly have an impact on farms in its path, and on some more than others. It is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to ensure that the impact of any road scheme be properly assessed. The Minister for Regional Development has advised that Roads Service is assessing the impact of the proposed A5 dual carriageway on farms along the proposed scheme on a case-by-case basis. An agronomist has been employed to assist in that process.

Where practicable, the impact will be mitigated as part of the scheme development. DFP's Land and Property Services will take account of the final impact as part of an overall compensation package. My main concern in the process is that the impact on individual farm businesses be minimised where possible and that they be properly compensated when the impact cannot be mitigated. The Member will be aware of the strategic nature of that and other schemes and that the Executive have considered and approved the progress of the A5 scheme in particular. Their consideration, therefore, concluded that the wider economic and social benefits that would result outweighed any potential negative impact.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's commitment to having an individual farm assessed by need as regards farm activities. Given the difficulties with negative equity, what assurances can the Minister give that farmers will get a fair deal for the land that they may be required to give up?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department for Regional Development is looking at that on a case-by-case basis. Indeed, it did a piece of work in conjunction with the Ulster Farmers' Union and my Department to develop guidelines for the acquisition of land or property for major road schemes. That document provides landowners with a useful background to the process and the parties and timescales that are involved. The document is published on the DRD website, and it is available to anyone who wishes to access it.

Dr Deeny: From the Minister's agricultural point of view, will she take on board the point of view of health and safety and saving lives? As I have, she has probably used the new A4, and she will know the reputation of what is known locally as

the Ballygawley line, which runs from Omagh through Ballygawley to Dungannon. The A4, on which I have travelled twice in the past week, is a magnificent improvement. I have no doubt that it will save lives, which should take precedence. I have no doubt that the A5, which is being progressed west of Ballygawley towards Omagh, will do the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question.

Dr Deeny: Will the Minister agree that saving lives should take precedence?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I agree fully with the Member, and I welcome his supplementary question. I have known many people who have been killed over the past decades on the Ballygawley line. It has been a notorious stretch of road. There is so much potential for saving lives through road schemes so that people do not take a chance by overtaking on bad corners because they are being held up by traffic and, ultimately, end up in a collision. I absolutely agree that the scheme should be progressed not only for the benefit of saving lives but for the economic impact that it will have on the region.

Mr Buchanan: If those lands are vested and not utilised for a few years, perhaps because of future funding constraints, will farmers still be able to use the land for single farm payment claims (SFP), or will they have to bear the brunt of financial loss because the land has been vested?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Loss of land that carries single farm payment entitlements may result in their loss unless they can be transferred on to a similar area of land. Alternatively, they can be sold, but if a landowner cannot mitigate the loss of SFP through the transfer of sale of entitlements, I understand that the loss may be considered in the overall valuation by the district valuer. However, where mitigation proves successful, the costs of sale, including the agent's fee and other incidental costs, are payable as compensation instead.

Farm Produce: 2012 Olympics

4. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to ensure that Northern Ireland farm produce is being promoted to the London 2012 Olympic committee. (AQO 549/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Locally, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is the lead Department for the 2012 Olympics, and I understand that, as part of an Olympic task force, DCAL is working with Invest NI to promote the business opportunities that the Olympics present. My Department works closely with Invest NI to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach to supporting our food industry. Invest NI is working with the London organising committee of the Olympic Games to ensure that companies are given the opportunity to bid for contracts for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. My Department continues to provide technical support and advice to producers and processors to help them to engage in public sector contracts. I understand that the Olympic caterers are required to include regional and speciality foods, and that offers a great opportunity for local producers.

Mr G Robinson: What is the Minister doing to prevent a protectionist policy being developed in the Republic of Ireland against food that is produced in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: That issue has been raised by a number of Departments. Indeed, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment raised it. I have made my position very clear: we could work together to promote food from the island of Ireland and compete with the world as opposed to competing with each other. There is much benefit in working with food companies across the island to get that message across. Our food companies, producers and processors will not be slow to avail themselves of any opportunities that are available to them, and they will be keen to work to compete in a global market for export opportunities.

Mr McCarthy: Portavogie prawns, Comber spuds, Mash Direct and Rich Sauces are all excellent products and facilities from the Strangford constituency. Is it not advisable for the Minister to produce a list of those exquisite foods from my constituency and others to give to the 2012 Olympics organising committee?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Since Jim Shannon has left, I did not think that I would hear that type of list being read out in the Chamber, because he was normally the one to come up with such lists.

The EU protected food names scheme provides an opportunity to protect regional produce on a geographical basis and for that produce to be promoted with a recognised European quality mark. The new season Comber potato, for example, is one of the protected geographical indication (PGI) names going through. We certainly do what work we can to promote local produce. Although state aid rules apply constraints on the Government, we do all that we can. Indeed, a number of years ago, I went to the Anuga exhibition in Cologne to promote local produce in a global setting. Therefore, like other European member states, we do what we can within EU state aid constraints.

Mr Cree: The Minister is obviously aware that this is an important issue. After the commercial for Strangford, I wish to point out that a company in north Down is now, for the first time, selling sausages directly to Canada. A great marketing opportunity, therefore, exists. However, I am not hearing about any particular strategy or plan from the Minister to promote the Northern Ireland agrifood business.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member is not hearing that because it deviates slightly from the bulk of the question. I was trying to answer the supplementary questions by basing them in and around the substance of the main question. I assure the Member that bodies such as the Industry Advisory Panel, which my Department set up in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), support the agrifood business. There is a raft of opportunities for the food sector and a range of support from the processing and marketing grant (PMG) scheme right through. However, I do not have that information in front of me today. There is a wide range of not only financial assistance but mentoring, benchmarking, and training opportunities available through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). A lot is going on in the food sector, and that is helping the sector to compete.

The main question asked was specifically about the Olympics, and I was trying to answer that question and the supplementary questions around that. However, if the Member wants to put down a specific question on the issue that he raised, I would be more than happy to answer it.

Mr Burns: Given that the US giant McDonald's is the only branded restaurant at the British

Olympic Games and that it sources quite a bit of its food from all of Ireland, has the Minister any plans to establish how much food will be purchased from Northern Ireland for the 2012 Olympics?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member is quite right. McDonald's is one of the sponsors of the Olympic Games and will be providing thousands of meals during the Olympics to athletes, spectators and officials. The beef industry in the North supplies about 12% of the beef that McDonald's uses across Ireland and Britain. The Olympics will, therefore, represent a significant market for the 2,400 beef farmers who already supply to McDonald's, as well as for the egg and cheese producers who supply to it. It is a good win for us. McDonald's applies rigorous standards to the beef that it uses from the North, and the farmers who provide beef and other products to McDonald's have to meet very high standards.

Woodland

5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department is meeting its woodland creation targets. (AQO 550/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Programme for Government (PFG) target is to increase woodland cover by 1,650 hectares by March 2011, primarily through the conversion of agricultural land to land under the woodland grant scheme. That was always going to be a challenging target, not least because of the pressures faced by farmers and landowners. Up to the end of this year, 653 hectares of new woodland will have been created. That is less than I had planned at this stage of the target period, and it is now unlikely that the target will be achieved by March 2011. However, I remain committed to the forestry strategy's long-term aim of doubling the area of woodland in the North of Ireland.

In November 2009, for example, I announced increases in grant rates of up to 30%. Since then, there has been a steep rise in the area of woodland creation applied for. In fact, when compared with the amount applied for during the same period last year, it was 70% higher. I expect that increased interest in applications to result in more woodland creation. However, it will not all be within the PFG target period.

My Department will continue to do all that it can to promote woodland creation, because it recognises the numerous benefits that that offers for all the people of the North of Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her response. I recognise that she is a supporter of the natural environment through programmes such as the countryside management scheme. However, does the Minister agree that the unenviable position of being bottom of the European league for woodland cover is a concern? Will the Minister consider introducing a programme similar to the Plant! programme in Wales, where a tree is planted for each child who is born or adopted?

2.45 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will certainly look at any scheme that will result in more woodland creation, which, as the Member pointed out, I support. It is not good to be bottom of the league for woodland cover. We do what we can within our financial constraints. However, issues have come up around definitions, and we are trying to work out the detail of that at European level. I would love to see many more people taking up grants and creating new woodland, particularly broadleaf woodland, which is a type that people need to be encouraged to step up to create.

Mr I McCrea: The previous questioner referred to the Plant! scheme, and I welcome the Minister's commitment to consider that. If we all took a lead on that, I would have to plant three trees this evening when I get home. Well, perhaps not this evening, because the trees will not grow that quickly.

The Minister will know that I have raised the issue of the recreational use of our forests previously. Will she tell the House how that has been moving forward, especially with respect to mountain biking?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We have been working through difficulties with the mountain biking programme in the Mourne. I am very keen that that programme is followed through and that the track is built as soon as possible. Already, it is getting quite a lot of use, even though it has not been formally opened or completed. The recreational and social use strategy has worked very well. I have a list of the different areas of recreational use

in our forests, which I am happy to share with the Member. We could do more.

For a period, forests were seen as something to raise revenue for the Department and as something to be replanted. I see them as a jewel that we are not fully utilising. If we can encourage everybody to use forests recreationally, the impact on well-being and physical health would be very obvious. Therefore, I will do what I can. In developing plans, I am very grateful for the support of the Environment Minister and, for example, the Tourist Board and local councils.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra.

I listened very attentively to the Minister's answer. She said that targets have not been reached but that the aim is to double the area of woodland. Will the Minister inform us when her Department will conduct a review of its woodland creation targets so that we can get some handle on where the Department may be going with that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is an ongoing review, because I feel that it is very important to have a handle on the levels of woodland that are being created. I have figures for the area of new woodland that has been created under the woodland grant scheme in the past five years. It amounts to 2,209 hectares and figures are given for each year. If the Member wishes me to pass that information on in writing, I am happy to do so. I am keeping a very close eye on those levels, because I recognise that it would be remiss of me to allow the targets not to be met and to find out, too late, that we can do nothing about that. For various reasons, we will not meet the PFG target, but I am keen to do all that I can to ensure that people have the opportunity to take up our grant schemes and create new woodlands.

Chinese Lanterns

7. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to address the potential damage from fires on farms or danger to livestock as a result of the use of Chinese lanterns. (AQO 552/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am aware of anecdotal evidence

of damage to crops and livestock in Britain caused by the use of Chinese lanterns. However, there have been no similar reports here. Therefore, I have no specific plan at present, other than to ask the farming community to be aware of the potential for fire damage and injury to livestock and to be particularly vigilant at those times when the devices are commonly used and during spells of dry weather.

I understand that, in England, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is working with trading standards officers to encourage importers to improve the safety of Chinese lanterns and to make them fully biodegradable. From press reports, it seems that some manufacturers are already moving towards the use of materials such as digestible bamboo rather than wire, and I endorse that. My officials will liaise as necessary with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and other Departments, agencies and representative bodies on the island of Ireland and in Britain to promote greater awareness among the public and the farming community of the dangers of Chinese lanterns.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for her response. As part of that liaison, does the Minister feel that, so that farm safety is top of the priority list, there are lessons to be learned from Great Britain to ensure that that problem is not imported into Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I agree. We want to keep a close eye on what is happening in other places. As I said, I have not heard any evidence of Chinese lanterns creating problems here, but I ask people to be vigilant. If they know that there are Chinese lanterns about and a farmer is not aware of it, that information should be passed on. I have heard stories of wires sticking in the throats of cattle and getting into silage and feeds, so we need to be vigilant. When manufacturers move to the use of fully biodegradable materials, there will be less of a problem.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Bovine Tuberculosis: Pre-movement Testing

9. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether pre-movement

tests on female animals are necessary, given that the tests taken have shown a detection rate of only 0.01%. (AQO 554/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Pre-movement testing is an EU requirement at our current incidence level. Five brucellosis reactors were found in 2010 through that form of testing, and those animals represented a significant risk of spread to other herds had they been allowed to move. Additional reactors are regularly found during routine herd tests, which farmers use as a free pre-movement test. That form of testing provides indirect additional benefits by discouraging casual and unnecessary cattle movements.

Mr Irwin: Would the Minister consider extending the movement period from four weeks to eight weeks, in line with the Irish Republic?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, the Member will be aware that the South has achieved brucellosis-free status. Farmers there are working through their time period and can use different rates of testing. I have told the industry here that that will be one of the benefits that we will have when we have zero incidence of brucellosis.

The Member will also be aware that we have two brucellosis spikes in Keady and Lislea. There has been much discussion about those in the media, and a great deal of work has been done by my Department and me to eradicate brucellosis across the North. We want to eradicate brucellosis for good. We are nearly there, but we must ensure that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater by changing the test rates until we are brucellosis free. The EU would not allow us to do that anyway, as we must be below a detection rate threshold of 0.2% before we can change our testing regime.

Flood Protection:

Connswater Community Greenway

10. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's current position on the flood alleviation scheme as part of the Connswater community greenway in east Belfast. (AQO 555/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Rivers Agency has brought forward proposals for flood alleviation works to facilitate the greenway environmental improvement project. That scheme is due for completion by 2014 and some £2 million of funding is in place for this financial year. However, given current Budget considerations, future funding remains uncertain. To accommodate that uncertainty, Rivers Agency has worked closely with the other partners in the project to ensure that we gain maximum benefit from the available funding.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister assure me that she will continue to work actively with all the other relevant agencies and commit to the programme led by the Connswater community greenway, which will help the people in east Belfast and alleviate their fears of flooding? If the Minister commits money to the scheme and it goes ahead, it will save money in the long run.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have been careful not to raise expectations on that matter. We have bid for the funding and hope to get it, but it may not be there. We recognise the benefits of the greenway scheme, but I have been careful not to raise false hope that the work can go ahead and that Rivers Agency has the money to do its part. I recognise the point that the Member made; other representatives from east Belfast made it in the past. We will do what we can, but we are limited by the funding that is available to us.

Mr Lyttle: As one who has cycled on the greenway and seen the proposals, I agree that the scheme has great potential to alleviate flooding in the area. In recent weeks, the Connswater river threatened to burst its banks and flood the Sydenham area of east Belfast. It is my understanding that the £2 million that has been allocated is under threat if future funding is not confirmed soon. Will the Minister speak to that concern?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The other funders of the greenway, which include the Big Lottery Fund, Belfast City Council and the Department for Social Development (DSD), have indicated their continuing commitment to the project, but we have to work with what we have. That is why I have been very careful not to raise expectations. As I said, we would love to be able

to participate fully in the project and to see it through to fruition, but, at this point, our funding prospects are not known.

Woodburn Forest: Disease

11. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the impact of tree killing disease on the Woodburn Forest, Carrickfergus. (AQO 556/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has taken the necessary action to minimise the risk of spread of the P. ramorum disease of larch. Based on scientific evidence, infected Japanese larch in Woodburn Forest and on other public and private land must be felled, as that is the best method for controlling the disease and preventing further damage.

To date, 34.9 hectares of immature woodland and 25.1 hectares of mature woodland have been felled in Woodburn Forest, against a planned felling area of 216 hectares. Forest Service is on track to complete felling by the spring of 2011.

Biosecurity precautions are in place in Woodburn Forest and at other affected woodlands to prevent further spread. Those apply to forest operators who are harvesting infected areas, which minimises the risk of spreading disease at Woodburn Forest on footwear, clothing, vehicles, tools and equipment. Biosecurity precautions are also now in place to allow infected logs to be transported under a movement licence to authorise wood-processing facilities with the appropriate plant-health controls.

In addition, in public forests, signs have been erected to explain to visitors what action they can take to minimise the risk of spreading the disease. That is very important, and I know that the Member's constituents will be interested in that. We are keen that people do not inadvertently bring the disease back to their own gardens, because it can be found in woody shrubs such as rhododendrons and azaleas. We want people to respect the biosecurity signs and not to bring the disease back to their own land.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answer and the Department for the action that it has taken. Woodburn Forest has many uses. Are

there any guidelines for the reinstatement of the affected lands?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There are guidelines. It is roughly two years before we can replant an affected area. We do not want to create a further explosion of the disease by replanting too soon, so although I do not have a specific figure, I am happy to get back to the Member in writing with more detail.

Rural Development Programme: Axis 3

12. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the uptake of the axis 3 EU fund of the rural development programme. (AQO 557/11)

13. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of the money spent to date under the axis 3 EU fund has been allocated in grant awards. (AQO 558/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 12 and 13 together.

Momentum is building well, with some £24 million of commitment already made and some £39 million worth of applications being processed. To clarify, commitment relates to applications that have been scored as "successful" by local action groups, those that have been ratified by joint council committees and those that are in the process of being issued with letters of offer or have been issued with letters of offer for grant aid but have not yet completed them. The £39 million worth of applications being processed refers to those applications that have been received but which have not yet been assessed.

Although both of those amounts are substantial, as I have already said in the Assembly and, more recently, in the media, I am very concerned about the slow progress of expenditure in this axis compared with that in the rest of the rural development programme.

At present, almost £2.5 million has been paid to axis 3 promoters in grant aid for projects, which equates to 41% of total spend under the axis. Although that progress is welcome, I am

conscious that axis 3 project spend needs to be increased significantly.

It is worth noting that actual spend on projects is not within the gift of officials. It is up to project promoters to ensure that their projects are delivered to allow grant aid to be drawn down against the costs incurred.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 3, 6 and 12 have been transferred.

3.00 pm

Ulster Orchestra: Christmas Concert

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial assistance his Department has given to the Ulster Orchestra to support its free 'Christmas Cheer' concert at the Waterfront Hall on 3 December 2010 and whether he will be attending this event. (AQO 561/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

(Mr McCausland): The Arts Council of Northern Ireland did not provide financial assistance for that specific event. However, it provided the Ulster Orchestra with £2,196,720 through its annual support for organisations programme (ASOP) for 2010-11. The Ulster Orchestra also received Lottery funding for projects such as a Christmas tour, an outreach tour and a choral concert. I understand that I have received an invitation, and will consider attending if my diary permits.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister — or, Mrs Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: I like the first title, Deputy Speaker. I am pleased that the Minister is not about to cancel Christmas this year anyway. However, what assurances will he give on his commitment to funding for the Ulster Orchestra in his budgetary negotiations with other Executive Ministers?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will give due consideration to the allocations of funding to all spending areas within my Department's remit. In doing so, I will take full account of the impacts that such allocations will have across the range of my Department's responsibilities, including the arts sector.

All decisions on spending cuts will require detailed consideration through the ASOP

decision-making process. I can assure the Member that the Ulster Orchestra is funded by the Arts Council under ASOP, and it will be for the Arts Council to determine funding allocations in line with its business plan.

Lord Browne: The Ulster Orchestra performs the majority of its concerts in Belfast. Does the Minister agree that it is important that it should have a wide range of outreach projects? Will he provide details of performances given by the orchestra outside Belfast in the past year?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I agree with the Member's point that it is important that we recognise that it is the Ulster Orchestra and, therefore, it has a responsibility right across the country. Regional concerts were given in Armagh, Ballymena, Bangor, Coleraine, Londonderry, Enniskillen, Hillsborough, Newtownabbey, Strabane, Omagh, and it went as far as going down to the Republic, to Dublin.

Mr Beggs: What is the level of demand for the free Christmas concert, and how are tickets allocated to ensure that there is wide community representation, so that those who could not otherwise afford to listen to such excellent music attend and enjoy it?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The Christmas Cheer concert is for community groups, and 15 free tickets are available for each community group on a first come, first served basis. The orchestra, therefore, seeks in that way to reach out to individuals and communities who may not otherwise be reached. One benefit of that is the potential to increase its audience for future concerts.

Sport: North Down

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action his Department has taken in relation to sports in the North Down area. (AQO 562/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for taking action on sports in north Down rests with sports organisations in the area and North Down Borough Council. Assistance in developing sport in north Down, and in other regions of Northern Ireland, is available from the Department via Sport Northern Ireland.

Over the past three financial years, Sport Northern Ireland has awarded over £16

million to projects in the north Down area that are designed to help sports bodies and the council to develop sport in the locality. Of that, £15.3 million was awarded to North Down Borough Council for the development of active communities programmes in the area and to provide a 50-metre swimming pool at Valentine Playing Fields in Bangor. Remaining awards worth over £880,000 were made to a range of sports clubs, sports partnerships and centres to help them to take forward various sports and fitness programmes.

In addition, in May 2010 I published a 10-year sports strategy for Northern Ireland, entitled "Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2009-2019". The strategy offers a new 10-year vision for sport in Northern Ireland, of:

"... a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport".

It also contains 26 high-level targets based on the pillars of participation, performance and places, to be achieved over the next 10 years. That vision and those targets are relevant to all regions and sports in Northern Ireland, including those in the north Down area.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. What will the development of the 50-metre swimming pool do for North Down, and for Northern Ireland in general?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I welcome the Member's supplementary question. He raised one of the significant developments in sporting provision in Northern Ireland. The pool is one part of a new state-of-the-art leisure complex planned for North Down. It will be Northern Ireland's first Olympic-size swimming pool, and, as a regional centre of excellence, it will be enjoyed not only by the people of North Down but by everyone in Northern Ireland.

The 50-metre pool will meet the needs of the community in the North Down area and across Northern Ireland, as well as the needs of competitive and elite swimmers. It will also act as a catalyst for increasing general participation in aquatic activities across all age groups and abilities. It will have the ability to host international swimming competitions, which will have the potential to bring economic benefit to Northern Ireland, and to the North Down area in particular.

The complex will include three separate pools: a 50-metre pool; a 25-metre diving pool; and a leisure pool. The activities that those pools will provide for include competitive swimming contests and galas; competitive/elite swim athlete training; swimming club swim time; club swim training; water polo training and competition; and open public swim sessions. In addition, the diving pool will have adjustable floors to allow some of the aforementioned activities to be included. The leisure pool will include a wave machine and other attractions.

Mr Cree: Does the Department have any plans to develop sailing further, perhaps even to provide a centre of excellence for the sport in North Down?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member has strayed somewhat from swimming, although I acknowledge that the original question was about sports in the area.

There was a proposal for a sailing centre in Ballyholme as part of the elite facilities programme. I cannot comment further at this stage, because the process is still ongoing.

Mr McCarthy: When will we see the swimming facility officially opened?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Work is under way. Some time ago, I had the pleasure of going to Bangor, and I met with a number of councillors on that day. Not all councillors were there, and some people commented on the occasion without even bothering to go along. Nevertheless, those who were there recognised that it was a good start. The sod cutting has taken place, and work is under way. The intention is that the facility should be completed early in 2012. Therefore, it will be ready in good time for the major event that is coming to Northern Ireland; that is, the 2013 World Police and Fire Games.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been transferred.

Commemorations: 1912-1922

4. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether his Department is working with its counterpart in Dublin on commemorating important events from 1912-1922. (AQO 564/11)

7. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the timescale for the development of the commemoration strategy for 1912-1922. (AQO 567/11)

8. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether he can provide an assurance that the list of important events marking the decade 1912-1922 being compiled by his Department will include the 1916 Easter Rising. (AQO 568/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 4, 7 and 8 together. In considering the issue of commemorations, it was not my intention to create a commemoration strategy per se but to establish a framework under which significant historic events could be addressed. With that aim in mind, I convened a meeting with senior representatives from my Department's relevant arm's-length bodies on 21 January 2010 to discuss a strategic approach to commemorating upcoming events.

The group's key aims and objectives were to commemorate four-hundredth and one-hundredth anniversaries that occur in the period 2010 to 2021 in a way that delivers value for money, builds knowledge and understanding, and contributes positively to a shared and better future. The group recommended that the Department and its arm's-length bodies focus on a limited number of key themes; namely, the Plantation, the Titanic and 1912 to 1922.

In developing a strategic approach to the commemoration of events in Northern Ireland, I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, as I consider the issue to be solely a matter for DCAL and the Northern Ireland Executive.

On 21 September, I wrote to the Department's arm's-length bodies and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland to ask them to facilitate communities wishing to arrange events linked to the key themes through the provision of accommodation, records, artefacts, staff and information technology. The current list of events that the Department's arm's-length bodies identified is an early iteration of their plans.

That will develop and grow as the anniversaries of particular events draw near and as the community becomes more aware of facilities and assets at their disposal in the DCAL estate.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that he mentioned A Shared Future. With regard to that framework and those important events, does the Minister agree that he should be seen as representing all traditions in the community? Therefore, will events that are important to people, such as the 1916 Rising, also be commemorated?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: First, I want to say that I am strongly committed to a shared and better future; I have stated that clearly. It was one of the priorities that I set for my Department.

The Member asked about the 1916 Rising. Of course, an important issue is that such an event would have to focus primarily on Northern Ireland because it would be decided upon by the Northern Ireland Executive. Although the matter needs to be looked at, I would have thought that one difficulty with it might be that during the 1916 Easter Rising, nothing much happened in Northern Ireland or even in the Province of Ulster.

Earlier, the Assembly had a bit of a history lesson during the debate on Lord Craigavon. I will provide the Member with a brief explanation. The president of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Dinny McCullough, who lived in Belfast, set off at the time of the Easter Rising on the train to Dungannon with some of his friends. They decided that they could not have a rising in Belfast, so they would meet up with people in Dungannon and, then, possibly, head off together to Connaught. When they got as far as Dungannon, the people in Tyrone, who were led by Patrick McCartan, decided that they did not want to leave their home areas; nor would they take part unless they had been assured that the Pope had received word that a rising was due to take place and that the German guns had landed in County Kerry. Having failed to get satisfactory assurances, they all went home.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With vision like that, it is hardly worth asking questions. *[Interruption.]*

May I be allowed to ask my question, or am I just going to be heckled by the right-winger to the Minister's right?

Will the Minister accept that a much more inclusive and comprehensive view of that decade is nothing to be afraid of, even for unionism, seeing that his tradition came from Irish unionism to become that of two thirds of Ulster?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I repeat what I have already made clear: I believe strongly in the vision for a shared and better future. Of course, there are lessons to be learned from past commemorations, particularly those of 1966. Hopefully, when the hundredth anniversary of certain events occurs in 2016, there will be a much more shared approach that leads to that shared and better future rather than the divisive approach that, perhaps, was taken in the past.

On 20 May 2010, I spoke at an event in Dublin. The other speaker was Brian Cowen, who was, and still is, the Taoiseach. He made the point that lessons were to be learned from how they had celebrated 1916 50 years ago and that, in 2016, it might be done very differently.

Mr Campbell: Earlier, the Minister referred to the debate on Lord Craigavon. Can he confirm that when the Department looks at the commemoration of events that occurred during that period, most people who are involved will consider an accurate transcription of events to be vital? Therefore, if something is about terror, it is commemorated as terror; if it is about violence, it is commemorated as violence rather than as a rewriting of history.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I welcome the Member's question because he got right to the heart of the issue. I am keen that honesty, accuracy and authenticity are needed when looking at events of the past. Too often, extremely unsavoury events have been dressed up in a different way. It is important to establish facts. Indeed, that was why, with regard to 1916, I thought that it would be useful to remind Members on the opposite Benches that nothing happened in Northern Ireland. If one seeks a relic of that event, the best that one could do is, probably, to get a train ticket to Dungannon.

Lord Morrow: There are no trains to Dungannon. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I had hoped that someone had preserved a ticket from 1916.

3.15 pm

Minority Languages

5. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the minority languages strategy. (AQO 565/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Before the summer, I was seeking clarification on a number of issues so that the draft strategy for regional and minority languages could be finalised. I am particularly concerned about the cultural rights of children in the classroom, and I want that to be addressed as part of the strategy. I have engaged in correspondence and have held several meetings with the Minister of Education to discuss that issue, but I still need firm assurances from the Minister of Education to enable the strategy to proceed.

I am also engaging with the BBC on some broadcasting issues that will impact on the strategy. As I have stated on previous occasions, education and broadcasting are central to any strategy for cultural or linguistic development.

I take this opportunity to reiterate that the guiding principles of the strategy will be that it is overarching, non-prescriptive, needs based and deliverable within existing resources.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister, but I have to say that the delay in producing the strategy is no longer acceptable. The Minister sends out rather contradictory messages. At times, he seems to recognise that there is some distinction to be made between the proper treatment of both the Irish language and Ulster Scots, but his dominant message, particularly by attempting to create a single strategy, is that there has to be parity of treatment for Irish and Ulster Scots. Does he agree that the interests of the Irish language and those of Ulster-Scots culture would be better served by distinct and appropriate treatments for each?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The development of a single strategy for both languages is designed to highlight both our shared heritage and the desire to strive towards parity between the languages. The concept of parity is one that a number of political parties have put forward on a wide range of issues over many years, and it would seem strange that, in this area, they would suddenly want to withdraw from and renege on that past commitment. I believe that it will be underpinned by our commitments in the charter, which already takes into account the position of each language.

I recognise that the languages are at different stages of development, and the structure of the strategy will accommodate that. We have a single cross-border language body with two agencies that work in a way that is complementary to

each other, and they sometimes carry out joint projects. In the same way, if we have an overarching strategy with two complementary strategies inside that, there will be opportunities to have cross-cultural and cross-linguistic events, programmes and projects that will help to create that shared and better future and to create the respect for both languages that is so desirable. Having heard some of the Members' comments about Ulster Scots in recent weeks, the Member who asked the question and others perhaps need to learn a little bit.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister review the aspect of the funding for the minority languages strategy in the context of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) cuts?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Everything that the Department does has to be looked at in the context of the coming CSR. That goes without saying.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for the answers to the questions so far. The Minister mentioned cross-border bodies. What sort of records do the Department's arm's-length bodies hold?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am not entirely clear about those records. If we are looking at arm's-length bodies, it is important that we ensure that they provide value for money and that they are efficient and effective. If we do that, we will make sure that they are delivering what we expect them to deliver.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been transferred, and questions 7 and 8 were grouped with question 4.

Sports Facilities

9. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the council-owned sports facilities which currently deliver programmes from grass-roots level to excellence and elite levels. (AQO 569/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My general assessment of the council-owned sports facilities, which currently deliver programmes from grass-roots level to excellence and elite levels, is in the public domain. That general assessment is set out in my sports strategy, 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019', which was published in May 2010. Sport

Matters recognises that district councils are Northern Ireland's major sports facility providers at community level and that they offer some excellent facilities.

However, 'Sport Matters' suggests that Northern Ireland is underprovided for at community and elite levels. It also notes that providers are facing major challenges in relation to public expectation, technical standards, costs and legislative change.

A more detailed evaluation, which helped underpin the 'Sport Matters' assessment, was carried out in 2009 by Sport Northern Ireland. That evaluation, entitled 'Bridging the Gap' recognises that there are a number of excellent multi-sports facilities and services provided by a range of organisations, including district councils. However, it also identifies unmet demand and shortfalls for a number of key facilities at local level. The report recommends the opening up, refurbishment and development of additional facilities to address those issues. Part of the purpose of 'Sport Matters' is to encourage all stakeholders to tackle those challenges on a strategic basis.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's answer to my question. He referred to examples of excellent facilities. Will he give us some examples of what he regards as excellent district council-owned sports facilities, and will he accept an invitation to come and view the excellent sports facilities in my constituency, in both Magherafelt and Cookstown?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I would be very disappointed if the Member did not raise a matter that concerns his own constituency, and I am happy to say that the Mid Ulster Sports Arena just outside Cookstown is an excellent example of a council-owned sports facility that serves the needs of the local community and elite performers and yet is still able to meet the requirements of a range of different sports. In 2000 and 2001 my Department, through Sport Northern Ireland, provided £370,000 towards the development of a synthetic pitch, floodlighting, an eight-room changing pavilion and an indoor training facility at the arena. That, in my view, sets a very good standard for sporting facilities in Northern Ireland, and I look forward to receiving the invitation from the Member to visit his constituency.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister take the opportunity to reassure those individuals who have

raised concerns about the effectiveness, the efficiency and the timetabling of the elite facility programme?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The elite facility programme encountered some difficulties because of a legal case relating to a specific application that was submitted around the deadline for applications. That particular case, and challenges that might have followed from it, caused a significant delay. A large part of the delay — indeed, almost all of the delay so far — was due to that. However, we are now looking at the comprehensive spending review, and I am sure that the Member will join with me in seeking as much funding as possible for sports facilities, so that we can get the best outcome for the people of Northern Ireland.

Fish Netting: South Down

10. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the level of illegal fish netting in the South Down area in the last year. (AQO 570/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since May 2010, DCAL fisheries protection officers have undertaken 28 patrols along the south Down coast in the recently commissioned fisheries protection vessel. Patrols were carried out from Kilkeel to Dundrum Bay and in Strangford Lough and Belfast Lough. Although no evidence of any illegal netting has been detected, patrols will continue along those coastal waters. The Department has also carried out 60 shore patrols since 1 April 2010. Protection officers responded to a number of reports of nets washed up on the coast near Annalong and Killough. However, the two nets did not contain fish. A net was seized from the shore at Derryoge Point near Kilkeel following 36 hours of observation. Again, it did not contain any fish.

The Department is also working with private water bailiffs associated with local angling clubs to make them more aware of their responsibilities and roles. That was launched by means of a seminar that was held in Newcastle on 5 May 2010. The new DCAL fisheries protection vessel has provided a highly visible deterrent along the south Down coast. Together with DCAL fisheries protection officer shore patrols and more effective private water bailiffs, those actions are providing an effective deterrent to those who would engage in illegal netting.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply and for that work. I particularly welcome the investment in the new fisheries vessel. What additional steps will the Minister take to prevent further illegal activities? Is he content that enough is done to prevent the illegal netting of fish, particularly salmon at this time of year?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department assumed direct responsibility for the enforcement of fisheries protection legislation in the DCAL jurisdiction on 1 June 2009. Since then, DCAL fisheries protection officers have been organised into teams covering four operational areas: the northern, south-eastern and south-western areas, and a unit that was established to focus on the enforcement of fisheries legislation on Lough Neagh.

In their management of the area, senior fisheries protection officers (FPOs) carry out regular patrols on land and water. Intelligence-led operations are carried out to detect breaches of fisheries legislation, and all illegal fishing gear and catches are seized. Any persons found to be acting illegally are reported with a view to prosecution. DCAL fisheries protection officers also carry out regular inspections at commercial dealers, fish retail outlets, hotels and restaurants to ensure that all fish sold have been legally caught.

Mr Bell: Many of us in Strangford appreciate the patrols that take place in Strangford Lough. Does the Minister agree that there is an adverse impact on the legitimate fishing industry and the angling clubs? They have to operate bureaucracy and so on to make the circumstances right, and they should not have to pay an unfair penalty on account of those who seek to fish illegally.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is unfortunate that we have to have in place all those procedures to prevent illegal fishing. It obviously has an impact on others. I am sure the Member will agree that it is a necessary task, and we need to address in a robust way the problem of illegal fishing.

Open-air Cinema

11. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps his Department is taking to promote open-air cinema events. (AQO 571/11)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Our partners in the exhibition sector continually seek innovative ways of screening product and bringing the cinematic experience in fresh, new, exciting ways to the widest possible audience across Northern Ireland. Belfast Film Festival has three open-air events planned between now and April 2011. My Department plans to secure large interactive screens for Belfast to enable people all over the United Kingdom to join in key celebrations and events connected to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. I also support Londonderry's aspiration to secure a live site for 2012, and discussions on that are currently ongoing.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister give us any idea at all when people will be told that it is going to happen for tourism?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I assume that the Member refers to the live site in Londonderry. In that matter, we are supporting others. Plans to secure that site are under way. A business case is being prepared by the 2013 City of Culture team in Londonderry and the 2012-13 games legacy unit has made a bid for £650,000 capital in the December monitoring round to support the city council of Londonderry in procuring that live site.

Mr Bresland: Has the Minister any plans for an open-air screen in Northern Ireland for the 2012 Olympic Games?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Plans are progressing to secure a live site for Belfast, and it is anticipated that it will be located in the grounds of Belfast City Hall, subject to planning permission. The live site is for use in the build-up to and during the 2012 games, and it will also be used for the 2013 World Police and Fire Games.

As I have said, the Department is facilitating discussions between the city council in Londonderry and the London organising committee for the Olympic Games with regard to a live site in the Maiden City.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 12 has been withdrawn. For Question 13, the Member is not in his place.

3.30 pm

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Irish Government: Request for Financial Assistance

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of a question for urgent oral answer under Standing Order 20 to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the implications for the Programme for Government (PFG) priority of growing the economy resulting from the Irish Government's request for financial assistance from the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF); and whether she plans to discuss the issue with the Irish Government.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): It is hoped that the €90 billion, which is £77 billion, of financial assistance from the United Kingdom, the IMF and the European Union, which was announced today, will place the Republic of Ireland's finances on a sounder footing. However, there will be further difficult choices ahead. On 7 December, details of the fiscal consolidation for 2011 will be announced in the Republic of Ireland's Budget, which is expected to have a significant impact on economic growth.

The Republic of Ireland's economy has already faced one of the deepest recessions in the euro zone, with output falling by 10.9% between 2007 and 2009. That has implications for the Northern Ireland economy, as the Republic of Ireland accounts for more than 10% of sales by local manufacturing companies and 28.5 % of exports. That highlights the importance of Northern Ireland firms diversifying their export base and seeking out new markets, which is one of the reasons why I will shortly lead a trade mission to China.

I intend to have discussions with the Irish Government on the matter only if the measures to reduce the Republic of Ireland's Budget deficit have direct implications for the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for setting out those initial options. I recognise that it is a

developing situation, but I sought to provide her with the opportunity to indicate that she is alive to our direct economic interests.

I reflect on the initiative that was taken by the Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson. On the setting up of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), he immediately arranged to meet his counterparts to discuss the implications of the significant property portfolio that they would be administering in this region. I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that she is prepared to meet her counterparts.

Most parties recognise that the economic travails that have emerged have already had a significant impact, particularly on our construction industry. I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that she is alive to all those downstream implications and is taking the necessary steps. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Member for making those points. Some concerns have been raised about the UK's contributing to a bail-out for a country in the euro zone, but we need to recognise that the global economy is becoming ever more integrated and that what happens in the Republic of Ireland has an impact on us here in Northern Ireland.

Today, I spoke to the Secretary of State and to the Finance Minister about our seeking assurances from the UK Treasury and the Government that the conditions of any loan between the UK and the Republic of Ireland will reflect the particular needs of Northern Ireland. I make that point in light of the recent job losses from the Bank of Ireland. We need to speak to the UK Government about the availability of finance for bank customers in Northern Ireland and about any further restructuring of the banks so that jobs in the Northern Ireland banking system are protected. Those discussions continue, and I hope to meet the Secretary of State again later in the week.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

(Mr A Maginness): I thank the Minister for her reply. The difficulties that are being experienced by the Republic could have profound effects on all of us locally. Out of solidarity, it is important for us to keep contact, at the very least, with the Southern Government. I am slightly taken aback that the Minister indicated that she would meet the South's Finance Minister if the occasion

arose. I urge her to meet him so that she can be fully briefed on the implications, particularly for the banking sector. We are very dependent on the Bank of Ireland and First Trust. I urge the Minister to do that as soon as possible.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It will probably be my colleague the Finance Minister who will speak to the Finance Minister in the Republic of Ireland. However, the Member is right about our concerns surrounding jobs in the banking sector and access to finance, which has been a continuing debate in the House. He knows that, in my last Question Time, I raised the whole issue of access to finance. We need very quickly to speak to Treasury and the Secretary of State and say very firmly that if a loan is to go from Treasury to the Republic of Ireland, any conditions that are set should ensure that this part of the United Kingdom is protected from any adverse impact from the Republic of Ireland.

Private Members' Business

Domiciliary Care

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the challenges posed by the changing demographics; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that there is adequate investment in domiciliary care to meet the current and future needs of an ageing population. —
[Ms M Anderson.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Someone has a mobile phone on. Please switch it off.

Dr Deeny: I thank the proposers of the motion for allowing this very important debate to take place. Domiciliary care, just like the protection of children, is part of social care. To me, as a health professional, health and social care are totally interdependent. They both must be protected. I say that as somebody who has worked in primary care for over 25 years and can see the interdependency.

There are two issues. One is to do with ring-fencing the budget for health and social care, for which there is a very strong argument. The other issue is efficiency. If you do not mind, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will give an example of how we can increase efficiency. I am well aware that the debate is about domiciliary care. This morning, as has been mentioned, we heard about problems due to inefficiency in the Western Trust, in which now only two nursing home places a month are being allocated due to a lack of funding. That causes unnecessary bed blocking, with all of its consequences. As somebody who has worked in the community, I believe that many elderly patients, on discharge from hospital, can, with full and appropriate support, be looked after at home. That is what they want. There are, without doubt, some who, as Mr Gallagher said, have complex needs and need that extra bit of care, whether that be residential or nursing care. However, we are talking about domiciliary care here. The elderly want to be at home, if at all possible. The bed blocking is causing delayed admissions to hospital for patients who need to be hospitalised and treated. As has been mentioned, it costs £300 a day for a hospital stay, as opposed to the same for a week of home care.

The Minister is probably aware that, last Monday, I spent the day at Greenmount College

in Antrim on an all-day conference on the topic of looking after elderly patients in their homes. It was convened by the Regional Health and Social Care Board, and I advise our Minister and his Department to look closely at what was discussed and to take on board the recommendations of that very useful day.

What is common practice in England, Scotland, and particularly in Edinburgh, is a new concept to me, as a healthcare professional, and is one for the future. We had presentations from each of those areas about the process or concept of “re-abling” elderly patients after a significant health event.

“Re-ablement” means early intervention — with the emphasis on early — to help our elderly patients sustain or regain independence for the maximum time. The period involved is up to six weeks and it involves various carers and expert advice from occupational therapists. Regaining independence is what those patients want. They do not want what we have done so far, which is to create their dependence on others. Carers help the process of learning or relearning life's daily skills by doing “with” rather than “for” or “to” the elderly. That boosts their confidence, helps them regain their independence and leads to better health outcomes. People feel much better. My mother is just out after a week in the Downe Hospital and she already wants back to the way she was. At 86, she wants her independence back.

The presentations from Edinburgh and England were impressive. It has already been accepted by the public in both countries as a positive development in domiciliary care for the elderly. Long term, it is much cheaper. Therefore, it is a more efficient way to care for our elderly and it leads to better health outcomes. It is a win-win, situation all around. Patients are discharged from hospital and are looked after at home, where there is early intervention, and they quickly regain their independence. It is also much more cost-effective in the long term. We need to change the dependency mindset of families who believe that it is much better to get their loved-ones back on their feet and independent —

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

Dr Deeny: I think that we also need to bring the public on board, which is where the media are involved. The motion needs the full political

support of the Minister and the support of his Department.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I will begin by reiterating some of the points made. Every year, Northern Ireland trusts provide around 23,000 domiciliary care packages, and that totals around 235,000 hours of care every week. There are more than a dozen different types of domiciliary care, all of which make a real difference to the lives of a range of vulnerable people, including older people.

Domiciliary care can comprise day care, help with personal care, district-nursing visits, podiatry, physiotherapy, and participation in voluntary activity or respite care at home or in a residential home. For older people, such care is a lifeline that enables them to live in their own homes independently or be cared for in a residential nursing home. The fact is that Northern Ireland has the UK's fastest growing elderly population. More than 250,000 men and women in the population — nearly one in seven — are over 65. By 2030, that figure will increase to one in four, and nearly 83,000 will be aged over 85.

Demographic changes have a specific impact on demand for services. At the start of life, health costs are highest. They level out in adulthood and increase again with age. On average, people aged 85 or older cost the Health Service around nine times more to treat than people of working age. Life expectancy in Northern Ireland is on the rise, and the number of people affected by diseases associated with old age, therefore, also increases. The fact is that, as I have said many times, the Health Service works and life expectancy, thank God, is rising all the time.

However, many people also take arthritis, cancer, diabetes, chronic pulmonary disease, stroke, and so on, into old age. Therefore, the need for domiciliary care also increases. In the present Budget period, I have committed an extra £58 million from April 2008 to March 2011 to help support an additional 1,500 older people to maintain their independence. I have managed to continue to develop and expand the range of domiciliary care services available and increase the number of people who manage their own care packages through direct payments.

In 2008, I introduced the regional access criteria for domiciliary care in order to provide greater transparency and harmonisation in the

process of identifying and prioritising need. I managed to do that despite the fact that my budget was cut. Members will know that, because Members voted to do it.

3.45 pm

Most recently, the emergency Budget earlier this year took £113 million out of this year's money, which I had to find in addition to finding money for swine flu. I was supposed to be able to bid for swine flu money; I asked for £42 million, but got £5 million. In addition, following on from swine flu last year, a further £16 million was taken from my budget this year. Those are big cuts for my budget to absorb. In fact, we cannot absorb them, because of the demand that we are facing.

Against a background of limited resources, trusts are finding it extremely difficult to meet rising demand for domiciliary care services. Indeed, the whole health and care system is under considerable financial pressure as a result of cuts and increased demand, and not simply in domiciliary care. Each trust must manage demand for services within the funding envelope available. Given the severe financial constraints on the Health Service this year, and with the public sector facing severe financial challenges over the next four years, the requirement to prioritise the most vulnerable is likely only to increase. However, even more is needed, because we cannot allow the quality of services to deteriorate at a time in people's lives when they are needed most.

Many of the MLAs present, particularly those from the west, will have heard from constituents, so I point out that the budget for domiciliary care in the west has also increased each year, and more people are being looked after. Nevertheless, Members will have heard from constituents, carers, families and voluntary and community organisations about the increasing need for services. This need undoubtedly outstrips the moneys that are allocated, which should not be news to anyone sitting in the Assembly.

I have warned time and again that the health and social care budget is under significant strain. Already this year, cuts have caused huge problems and damage to services. Further cuts will cause pain and distress to large numbers of patients and vulnerable people. Indeed, the Finance Minister recently publicised his opinion that it would be proper to ring-fence moneys

for health but not for social care. Northern Ireland has an integrated health and social care service. Therefore, protecting health but not social care simply will not work. If we try to save money on social care, we will end up spending far more elsewhere, meaning that limited resources are spread ever more thinly across a system that is already struggling to cope.

Helping people at home is far cheaper than hospital treatment. Moreover, patients do better at home. They live longer and are happier. A delayed hospital discharge can cost up to £2,000 a week, when a domiciliary care package costing a fraction of that may be the solution. If we are to ensure that older people do not end up in hospital unnecessarily or stay there longer than they should because there is no money for a care package, the entire budget has to be protected. If we are to ensure that people with a learning disability or a mental health problem receive care and treatment quickly and are resettled in the community, instead of having to live in institutions, my entire budget must be protected. If we are to ensure that at-risk children do not end up in care because we cannot provide the right care and support quickly, my entire budget must be protected. Members will be aware that it is not simply looking after older people through domiciliary care that is supported by the budget for social care —

Ms M Anderson: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It also includes support for mental health and learning disability, as well as for at-risk children. Every year, 16,000 at-risk children are referred to the health and social care system. All of this must be dealt with.

The Member wanted to intervene.

Ms M Anderson: On three occasions, the Minister said that his entire budget must be protected. Is he advocating that we protect the £57 million that has gone out in bonuses over the past five years? Members have only to look at today's edition of 'The Irish News'. Is the Minister suggesting that the money that is given to senior management to go on what have been described as "junkets" is the sort of thing that he wants to protect, or is he looking to protect front line services?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I will refer to the two points that

Mrs Anderson made. For a start, as I have told the House — Mrs Anderson will have seen what I said in the Hansard report — the Health Service does not pay bonuses. No bonuses are paid to consultants. The allegation is that consultants get bonuses totalling £57 million. The Member is, in fact, confusing her figures. *[Interruption.]* I am happy for the Member to come back on that.

The suggestion was that we pay bonuses to consultants, but we do not. A national clinical excellence award scheme is part of the wages scheme.

Ms M Anderson: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Excuse me just a minute. The clinical excellence award scheme costs £12 million, not £57 million. I heard the Member on the radio this morning, and I think that she was getting confused with the RPA figures. My Department saved £53 million a year under RPA. There seemed to be confusion there, but, at any rate, we do not pay bonuses. The Member referred to an article in 'The Irish News' this morning, but I suggest that the Member read the Hansard report of last Thursday's meeting of the Health Committee. It would help her to understand where that story is going, because it is a non-story. That money was spent on training, which is money well spent as far as savings to the Health Service are concerned. It is unfortunate that factually incorrect stories that distort the facts are being used as an excuse not to face up to the need properly to fund the health and social care system in Northern Ireland.

Ours is the worst-funded Health Service in the UK. We are behind England, Scotland and Wales, and we slip further behind all the time. We cannot afford to slip behind any further, because our need is greater. We have the highest birth rate, and, therefore, our population of the cohort age groups that need the Health Service most — the vulnerable, young people and children — is growing faster than those in the rest of the UK. Our elderly population is the fastest-growing section of society anywhere in the UK, and that is why our need is greater. In fact, Appleby said that our social care need was 35% greater than that in England, yet we spend around 34% less on our children. *[Interruption.]*

The Member has already been up once.

The funding gap is such that people try to find excuses not to face up to it. If Members are factually correct when trying to do so, that is fine. However, what I listened to just now was factually incorrect. What I read in 'The Irish News' is a clear distortion of the situation. Those sorts of articles are damaging to the Health Service, not simply because of their content. I suggest that Mrs Anderson read the Hansard report of last week's Health Committee, because it has already examined that issue.

The Member has a problem with domiciliary care services but, as things stand, that situation will only get worse. All I can do is warn Members. I cannot make Members vote to support the Health Service, our elderly population and our vulnerable children, but I can warn them, as I have done over and over again. Members are starting to see, in their constituency offices, the consequences of those cuts. The Ulster Hospital, for example, has a main ward block with concrete cancer, unsafe wiring and a main sewer running underneath it. It is more than 60 years old and routinely gives problems. It is a building that cannot be repaired, but if we lose that ward block, what will happen to the Ulster Hospital? Those are the sorts of issues that the Assembly must face up to. All that I can do is point them out.

I hear Ms Anderson and others talking about finding additional funds and resources, but where do they think that those funds will come from? Do I go into the social care budget to take money from learning disability funding? Do I go into the children's fund to take money out of child protection funding? Is that what I am supposed to do, or should I take money out of the funding for acute hospitals, cardiac surgery or paediatric services? Those are the sorts of questions facing us. We do not have the money.

We push for efficiencies and, indeed, have made huge advances in efficiencies over the past three and a half years. I am the only Minister to have delivered on the review of public administration. No Sinn Féin or DUP Minister has achieved it, but I have achieved it. I have completely reorganised the Health Service to save £53 million a year and reduce administrative jobs by 1,700. All the time, the same numbers of staff do more and more work. That is what is called efficiency and doing better. However, those staff need and deserve support. Inaccuracies do not support them whatsoever.

It is a very important subject, because the Health Service is doing so well for the population. Our life expectancy is rising, and thank God that more people are living longer. However, those people need help. They need support to allow them to have extra years and quality extra years. That is where domiciliary care comes in, and it is just part of how we address the issue. I have put in extra money and will continue to do so, but demand outstrips the supply of resource.

As I have said to the House before: this is just the beginning. People need to be prepared to put their hands up to protect services, not just in health. Sammy Wilson has said that he will protect health. His figures do not quite add up — he is several million pounds short — but he is getting there. He is starting to get it. When I listened to some of what Ms Anderson said today and Caitríona Ruane said last week, I hoped that maybe Sinn Féin is starting to get it, too. Social care is so important to health. We have to look after the elderly population. We do not have a choice. If we do not look after elderly people in hospital, we have to look after them in their homes. It is one or the other. If we are not prepared to look after them at home, we will end up looking after them in hospital, with all that that entails.

I am not talking about bursting the budget or breaking the bank. I am talking about an easily affordable amount of money from the overall sum. Those are the questions that we will ask ourselves very soon. I am told that social care will not be ring-fenced. However, we now have a handle —

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: — on some of the social care issues, which is a major advance.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Many contributors recognised clearly the role that carers play in our society. In winding on the debate, I, too, wish to put on record my support for the carers and social services staff who contribute to society, day and daily. Many contributors also gave real examples of how individuals are affected daily by a lack of packages, changes in packages or long waiting lists for initial assessments. I will add another example, which my office dealt with recently.

It is the case of an elderly lady who was the main carer for her son who had motor neurone disease. She was his only carer since he first became ill. The lady was in her 70s, but she never asked for support from social services and took it all upon herself. When she broke her arm in a fall, she was no longer able to assist her son in moving or lifting him. She applied to social services for support. However, the process of getting any support was so long that, in the meantime, she had to ask for support from her friends, who were also in their 70s or 80s. The lady and her friends were so frustrated that they contacted me, and I got involved.

A package was being drawn up, but it took some time. In the six weeks between the lady breaking her arm and her receipt of support, she had to rely on whatever support she could gather up from the community around her. That is simply not good enough, and it is the sort of real example that we need to look at. The package of support and care that the lady eventually got took the form of direct payments. Therefore, she had to go out to find a carer herself. She was really concerned and frustrated. She did not know where to start, so she had to turn to me for support. That lady cared compassionately for her son all his life. However, she spent the last six weeks of his life fighting with social services. This was a lady who had never asked for one button of support in the past. We do not want such a situation to be repeated or to become the norm. We need to be serious and forward plan. As the motion outlines, we must recognise the changing demographics.

4.00 pm

Many Members referred to the statistics, and it is important to reiterate them. There are 300,000 people of retirement age in society today, and they make up 17% of the population. It is projected that there will be more than 130,000 people over the age of 80 by 2030. That will be a 103% increase from the 2010 estimates. I welcome the Minister's comments, and Jonathan Bell made the point that life expectancy has increased. We should be glad about that and celebrate it, but it is not clear whether life without disability and ill health has increased to the same extent. Therefore, naturally, a growing number of older people may be living longer with conditions that can seriously reduce their quality of life. Mickey Brady referred to that earlier when he talked about the effects of arthritis, stroke and

dementia. The reliance of people with those conditions on health and social care to maintain their independence will become paramount.

A number of Members referred to the briefing paper that all Members received from Age NI. I thank the organisation for that paper, and one clear point in it is the need to review the current system of social care. Age NI feels that the debate on social care is long overdue. Therefore, I hope that the House sends a clear message to Age NI today to the effect that we support the need for a longer-term approach to tackling the challenges being posed, because, until we do so, we will only be firefighting.

The Age NI paper also suggests that we look at the three emerging themes that are fundamental to the protection of older people: social care; prevention and provision; ageism and discrimination. Clearly, we have to look at social care, because evidence suggests that reductions in social care provision have the knock-on effect of increasing demand on the Health Service and on acute services. Secondly, the paper talks about the need to focus on prevention. As we all know, prevention is, in many instances, the key to the promotion of good health and a reduction in health inequalities. However, that is being undermined by the tightening of eligibility criteria for domiciliary care. Thirdly, the paper makes a point about ageism and discrimination. When services are limited or restricted, older people are disproportionately affected because they are the greatest users of the health and social care services.

Many Members made excellent contributions to the debate and, without rehearsing them all, I will pick up on a few common threads, the first of which was the recording of support and acknowledging the great work of social services and carers. Secondly, many Members recognised the change in the demographics. We all recognise that, and there is an absolute need to forward plan to meet those needs. Thirdly, a number of Members picked up on the issue of individuals not being able to be discharged from hospital. Sam Gardiner said that only 70 people could not be discharged this year because no package was in place. Quite frankly, it is not right to claim that it is "only" 70 people. That has a real impact on those 70 people, their families and their carers. We cannot think about people as numbers. We need to think of the human aspect.

Mickey Brady talked about entitlements, right and fairness. Those need to be central to all decisions that are taken on the way forward. The other issue was that carers' voices are not being heard. Carers' voices must be heard and taken into consideration at all stages. We need to challenge that position and create avenues that will allow voices to be heard and people to be involved in decision-making processes. Jonathan Bell made another good comment when he said that if we fail to plan, we plan to fail. I agree wholeheartedly with that comment, and we must forward plan.

The Minister delivered the speech that I expected him to deliver. He talked about the rising demand on the Health Service and said that he does not have the budget to deliver, and so on. We hear it during every debate. We understand the pressures on the Health Service, and nobody is taking away from that for one moment. However, I suggest that there is a need to use the resources that are available to his Department more effectively.

The health and well-being of older people needs to be promoted. Also, this is the time to move away from focusing entirely on acute care to focusing more on social care. Prevention requires political commitment and a fundamental shift in the way in which the Health Service works. Therefore, continuing situations of delayed discharge from hospital because of the lack of support packages is not efficient or responsive, and it is not an effective way to manage the resources that are available to the Department. It puts pressure on hospitals and on social services staff, and, as the Minister said, it is cheaper to provide care at home than it is to do so in hospital.

I welcome the fact that he recognises that, but he needs to put weight behind amending the processes that will allow change to happen. Fundamentally, forward planning is at the core of all this, and the Minister needs to forward plan, to change systems and practices, and to stop worrying about the political ramifications for his term in office.

The Minister referred to protecting the health budget. He needs to talk to his party colleagues on the Health Committee, who voted to protect health services and to leave out in the cold social services and public safety. The Minister needs to have a party discussion, because

there is a lot of disjointedness there. I will leave it at that. The points have been well made.

Mrs M Anderson: Does the Member agree that the Minister abdicated his responsibility in his response? He tried to dismiss as an inaccuracy a freedom of information request that disclosed that, in the previous financial year, 657 consultants received a bonus. Excuse me: the Minister said that it was a not a bonus but a clinical excellence award. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it is a duck, but the Minister calls it a clinical excellence award. The people who received it received in the region of £75,000, £60,000 or £48,000 over and above their salaries. The Minister might want to describe that as a clinical excellence award, but the carers who come into my mother and to all the people who need them across the North are the people who should be getting awards. They are the people who work over and above the call of duty, and the Minister should not try to differentiate between one set of workers and another. The Minister's comments in the Chamber today were dismissive and disgraceful.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her intervention. The point has been well made. Sinn Féin has been clear on the record that we will not ring-fence inefficiency and inequality in the Department. I will leave it at that, and I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. It has been a worthwhile and significant debate, and I ask all Members to support the motion. Let us bring forward the best possible way of ensuring that we provide for people in the community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the challenges posed by the changing demographics; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that there is adequate investment in domiciliary care to meet the current and future needs of an ageing population.

Adjourned at 4.07 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 November 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

PPS 4: Economic Development/ PPS 16: Tourism

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement to the House.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the effect that I am now issuing Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 4 on economic development and bringing it into effect. That document replaces the existing PPS 4 and supersedes policies for employment in 'A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland.' Today, I am also issuing Draft Planning Policy Statement 16 on tourism for four months' public consultation.

A thriving and expanding business community is critically important to our future prosperity and well-being. PPS 4 will help businesses in this tough economic climate to locate in the best places across Northern Ireland. Draft PPS 16 is a response to the challenges and opportunities of future tourism growth. Each PPS is important in its own right, and both have crucial roles to play in supporting economic growth.

PPS 4 concerns the development associated with industry, business, storage and distribution. It puts in place a modern and robust policy framework for the sustainable management of such development and shows how economic growth can be accommodated in development plans. It also gives flexibility and certainty over planning for economic development.

Various industries and business sectors have particular requirements for their location and surroundings. PPS 4, therefore, sets out different criteria for different types of development. Its policies also recognise that

cities, towns and villages differ in the scale of business and industrial development that they can reasonably accommodate. PPS 4 provides for office development to be focused in city and town centres, where it can benefit from the concentration of people and goods, public transport and other infrastructure. In those locations, office-based businesses also benefit from their proximity to business, professional, technical and financial services.

Communications and software design are closely related to high technology, knowledge-driven industries. PPS 4 recognises that there are usually economic benefits to grouping those industries in business parks. To protect existing businesses, PPS 4 prevents incompatible uses in their vicinity. For example, some sectors, such as life sciences and food processing, need a contaminant-free environment. In the case of such businesses, risk of contamination can be taken into account when considering new applications in their vicinity. Some businesses may require some degree of physical separation from neighbouring built-up areas because of noise or smell. PPS 4 takes account of that.

It is important to strike a balance between the need to protect the countryside from unnecessary development and the need to support rural communities. PPS 4 sets out the circumstances in which permission will be granted for economic development in the open countryside. It allows for the redevelopment and expansion of existing employment sites in the rural area, including for tourism. PPS 4 allows for small-scale economic development on suitable sites on the periphery of existing settlements where there are no alternatives in the settlement. PPS 4 encourages such industrial and business uses to cluster on one site in any particular area.

Good design is as important for economic development as it is for other forms of

development. Design is not just about appearance; it is about how a development relates to its surroundings. For that reason, PPS 4 includes general design criteria to ensure that adverse impacts are minimised. In all cases, development will have to accord with Secured by Design principles to ensure that the design of a development helps to deter crime and promote personal safety.

Economic development means investment, which generally means more building and a demand for land. We need a generous and continuous supply of land, which is what the regional development strategy requires. Identifying land for employment purposes is a matter for development plans, and PPS 4 provides guidance on estimating how much land is needed and where. Development plans can identify locations and specify a variety of economic uses to cater for future needs. Such variety and choice will maximise the opportunity for local and inward investors.

We need to protect land that is already zoned for employment for the future and to make sure that it is not lost to uses such as housing. To that end, PPS 4 protects zoned land and indicates where alternative uses may be permitted, including mixed-use regeneration schemes, especially where buildings of architectural or historical interest will be secured. In particular, PPS 4 allows for schemes such as the Titanic Quarter.

The publication of PPS 4 brings planning policy for economic development up to date by providing policy for offices, knowledge-based industries and storage and distribution. PPS 4 ensures that the right types of development are directed to the right location.

I will now turn to draft PPS 16 on tourism. In the draft tourism strategy for Northern Ireland 2020, which she published in February, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment set out a new vision, strategic direction and targets for tourism. The targets for achievement by 2020 are to increase visitor numbers from 3.5 million to 4.5 million and to double earnings from tourism to £1 billion. Those targets reflect the potential for further growth in the tourism industry in Northern Ireland and underline the potential of tourism as a key economic driver.

Increased tourism activity and investment of that scale will inevitably generate pressure for new development, such as tourist

accommodation, facilities, attractions and supporting infrastructure. Draft PPS 16 provides a clear and strong planning framework for managing tourism development in ways that are sustainable. It strikes a careful and sensitive balance between environmental concerns and the development of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland.

It is important to value what the tourist values, and that is reflected in draft PPS 16. Unmanaged and unsustainable development is not in anyone's interest. If permitted, inappropriate development could prejudice the longer-term interests of the tourism industry.

Northern Ireland boasts many assets, such as the Giant's Causeway and the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, which are valued and visited by those who are fortunate enough to live here and by tourists from further afield. Those assets are vital in providing a high quality and often unique visitor experience. To maintain the integrity and tourism potential of tourism assets, draft PPS 16 proposes policies to safeguard them from inappropriate and harmful development

Our cities, towns and villages have a great deal to offer tourists. As well as transport links, accommodation, restaurants and shops, our settlements boast places of historic or cultural interest, and they provide entertainment and other attractions. Draft PPS 16 aims to exploit that by focusing new tourism development in settlements. The synergies created between new developments and existing businesses and attractions will enrich the visitor experience and help to boost Northern Ireland's earnings from tourism. However, the policies in draft PPS 16 also recognise that tourists visit different areas for different reasons and to enjoy different experiences.

As not all forms of tourism development will be suited to an urban location, draft PPS 16 facilitates some tourism development in the countryside. It ensures that such development is sustainable within the broader planning policy context of the regional development strategy and PPS 21, which relates to sustainable development in the countryside. It also ensures that random, inappropriate or excessive development in the countryside is avoided.

Draft PPS 16 provides for tourist amenities in the countryside that are not suited to an urban or village location, such as angling centres. Similarly, it allows for tourist amenity proposals

that need to be located close to existing tourist attractions in the countryside, such as a visitor centre that is associated with a particular site of historic or archaeological importance.

Draft PPS 16 also proposes the removal of the much-criticised tourist needs test, which is applied to tourist accommodation proposals in the countryside. Replacement of that test with specific criteria that are tailored to different forms of tourism development will improve the transparency of policy. It will also make it easier for developers to ensure that their proposals accord with planning policy.

Draft PPS 16 sets out the circumstances in which hotels, self-catering units and holiday parks are permitted in the countryside. Generally, it encourages hotels to locate in settlements, but a hotel will be allowed in the countryside if the proposal includes the redevelopment of an appropriate existing building. A newbuild hotel will be permitted outside, but close to, a village or small settlement if there are no development opportunities in the settlement or in nearby villages. Clusters of three or more self-catering units may be permitted if they are within the grounds of a hotel, are associated with a significant visitor attraction or involve the restoration of a clachan or close. In all those cases, the policy requires the units to be retained for tourism use and not to be used for permanent residential accommodation.

Draft PPS 16 also provides for minor extensions to existing static holiday or caravan parks in the countryside and for new small-scale touring sites. However, the scope for integrating a new static holiday park or a large-scale extension to an existing facility into the rural landscape is limited. Regional planning policy is not a suitable tool for the identification of such sites, and, accordingly, draft PPS 16 requires proposals of that nature to be directed to sites identified in a development plan.

Draft PPS 16 also includes general and design criteria that are applicable to all forms of tourism development. Those criteria will be used to assess all applications for tourism development to ensure that Northern Ireland gets sustainable, safe and high quality tourism schemes.

Draft PPS 16 provides a planning policy framework that is right for Northern Ireland. It will contribute to the economic prosperity of Northern Ireland by safeguarding our rich and

diverse tourism assets and by ensuring that future tourism development is sustainable and of high quality. We are at the start of the public consultation period on PPS 16. Planning policy for tourism is an important issue, and I encourage everyone with an interest in tourism to tell the Department what they think.

Both draft PPS 16 and PPS 4 will help us to achieve the modern vibrant economy that is the Executive's top priority. Now more than ever, it is essential that we have the tools in place to meet the challenges of economic recovery and a highly competitive global economy. My Executive colleagues welcomed both PPS 4 and draft PPS 16. I now commend those planning policy statements to the House.

10.45 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask questions both as Committee Chairperson and as an MLA for Newry and Armagh.

On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Minister's statement. One of the Committee's key concerns when we discussed the early proposals of Planning Policy Statement 4 was that guidance could hinder rural business regeneration that is fostered by European funding. What liaison has there been with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to ensure that that will not happen? Will the Minister also indicate whether the policy will protect existing businesses or does he intend to introduce policy to protect them?

The Committee is disappointed that we did not have prior sight of the PPS 16 proposals. A departmental official promised us that we would see planning policy statements as they came forward. Will the Minister indicate whether the policy will allow for chalet-type or small cottages to promote angling in rural areas such as mine?

The Minister of the Environment: The Chairperson raises a number of issues. First, Planning Policy Statement 16 is a draft policy. We will go through an extensive consultation exercise, a process in which the views of the Committee will be given full consideration. We will be very interested to hear its views on the issue.

We indicated that, although an emphasis will be placed on creating tourism development opportunities in urban settings — cities, towns

or villages — there are areas in which that may not be possible. In my statement, I mentioned that an angling centre, for example, would not be suited to an urban setting. All those issues are open to interpretation, and we will seek to clarify them during the consultation process on the draft policy. The policy can accommodate industry that exists in the countryside and uses existing buildings. We will look to accommodate such industry where possible. Industry should be developed in the industrial areas that are identified in area plans. PPS 16 will encourage that, but we recognise that there are opportunities for diversification.

The Chairperson asked about liaison with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and about European funding. Previously, planning permission was granted on the basis of whether the Planning Service thought that there was an identifiable need. When the local action groups (LAGs) now identify an economic need and that the project is sustainable, the Planning Service will take that as advice and not seek to second-guess the proposal. That is the basis on which planning approvals will be granted now.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. He identified the centrality of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy. To follow on from the Committee Chairperson's question, will the Minister indicate whether tourism development will be allowed anywhere in settlements?

The Minister of the Environment: There is a general presumption in favour of development for tourism purposes in settlements, subject to proposals respecting the site context, residential amenity issues and, indeed, the character of the settlement. Development will also be assessed against the specific provisions of a development plan. Tourism development opportunities may be restricted on land that is zoned for alternative uses or that is subject to protective designation or significant development constraints. However, in general, we will be very supportive of tourism opportunities in settlements.

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate the Minister on his statement and welcome much of it.

With regard to PPS 4, it is essential that the Minister speaks to the Regional Development Minister to ensure that the transport system is integrated to encourage what he is doing. By that, I do not mean roads such as the A5, A8

or A6. If I may, I will unashamedly talk about Belfast International Airport. We always push Belfast International Airport, which has the capacity and could be expanded so that we have more jobs and use it better. However, there is very poor transport access to it.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister discuss that with the Regional Development Minister to ensure that we get proper and better integrated transport to all the areas that he is planning?

The Minister of the Environment: I will be discussing the regional development strategy with the Regional Development Minister this afternoon. That is a key document, and it is very important to get it right. I have issues with that document that I want to raise with him. As he just indicated, the Member will have issues to raise with the Regional Development Minister in relation to that document. I will certainly highlight to the Minister for Regional Development the issues that the Member has raised today.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the statement. Although it does not mention the seaside, it does refer to the Giant's Causeway and the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge. I am more than happy about that. Is the Minister satisfied that PPS 16 will address the very serious issues in our seaside towns and villages, which have been decimated by very bad and unbalanced planning that has no sense of the needs of the indigenous communities?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member raises a different type of question about the needs of local communities in towns that are used widely for tourism purposes. I tend to agree that a heart within a town is needed if it is going to be attractive to tourists. To have that heart in a town, there needs to be an indigenous population that lives there the whole year round to create a sense of being and a sense of belonging. That will not be dealt with by PPS 16; it needs to be dealt with through the area plan process.

I trust that, as we approach the Planning Appeals Commission hearing on the northern area plan, Members from that area will ensure that the towns there will be enhanced in many ways and will be greatly improved through the opportunities that exist in them and that good

planning procedures are put in place. As we hand that power over to local authorities in due course, I have no doubt that local councillors will take up the battle and ensure that those towns are protected.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome its contents, particularly the part that sets out to protect the countryside from unnecessary development. Hopefully, that includes the coast.

PPS 4 protects zoned land. Will that be set in stone? I am thinking of a planning application in my constituency for a 25-acre site that is zoned for employment. The wish is for a mixed-use development on that site. Will PPS 4 rule out any mixture of housing and small business units, etc?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 4 seeks to protect employment opportunities and economic opportunities. Therefore, if an area is identified within an area plan for those types of opportunities, PPS 4 will largely protect that area from other types of development. However, we need to be flexible, and if there is a compelling case, the issues that are raised will be taken into consideration. By and large, the document will strengthen the case for industrial land to stay as industrial land, as opposed to being used for residential purposes.

Mr Givan: I, too, welcome PPS 4 and draft PPS 16. I am aware of some applications that are in the system that may benefit from PPS 4 coming into effect. Will the Minister advise the House of how many planning applications there are across the Province that may now benefit from PPS 4 coming into effect?

When discussing PPS 16, the Minister highlighted that a specific tourist need was required for hotel development. How will that draft policy make it easier for hotel development to occur in urban settings?

The Minister of the Environment: With regard to businesses that would benefit from draft PPS 16, around 200 planning applications are associated with rural businesses. I have absolutely no doubt that a considerable number will be approvable on the basis of the document. I think that the document will, therefore, be largely welcomed.

It is my intention in the very near future to bring out a further planning policy statement

on economic considerations. That will further enhance and place further emphasis on the opportunities for economic development. It is essential, in this time of recession, that we are doing that and that we are looking to support and aid business in sustainable development.

The draft planning policy statement's emphasis on providing new hotels in urban areas can significantly enhance the tourism potential of settlements, be of greater tourism benefit and be more readily integrated into the built environment. Previously, hotel operators may have been required to demonstrate a specific tourist need for the area in question. Applications often came in with a Tourist Board letter of support, but those were generic letters and did not add particular value to the application. We will not require such letters for us to give approval to a hotel in an urban settlement. If the application meets and complies with the other standards that I outlined, namely, integration, residential amenity and so forth, those hotels will normally be approved.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, welcome the Minister's announcement on PPS 4 and draft PPS 16. With regard to PPS 4, the Minister referred in his statement to small-scale development on the edge of settlements. Will he ensure that any developer who seeks to make use of that change of policy is forced to look at all other alternatives before they come to the edge of a town? In addition, why does draft PPS 16 not facilitate tourism development throughout the whole countryside?

The Minister of the Environment: Development on the periphery of a village will be permitted only after the opportunities for development in the village or town are identified and only if there is availability in the area.

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

We need to facilitate tourism development throughout the countryside in a way that is sustainable and that would not run counter to the planning policy framework that we established in PPS 21 and, indeed, in the regional development strategy. Therefore, projects that tend to be a bit random in their appearance or inappropriate or excessive development could end up damaging our landscape quality and rural character and, as a consequence, diminish the key tourism asset in the countryside. In that way, failure to value what the tourist values would impair the long-

term viability of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. The dispersal of tourism development throughout the countryside could forfeit any sustainable and economic benefits that could be derived from a concentration of tourism development in settlements. That said, however, there will be opportunities in the countryside that are sustainable. Therefore, they have to be given a fair and balanced hearing, and I trust that that will happen as a result of this document.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's announcement, particularly that on PPS 4, where he reminds us that the incompatible use of planning permissions in vicinities, for example, when food science companies are not able to locate in a vicinity due to potential contaminants, will be particularly welcome.

Will he assure the people of Crumlin in particular that an application such as that for Rose Energy will never again be possible under the new guidelines that he is bringing forward today on PPS 4?

11.00 am

The Minister of the Environment: As the Member well knows, there is a judicial review in relation to that application, which constrains us from getting into the detail of it.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he highlight the significant differences between the existing PPS 4 and the revised PPS 4 that he has announced this morning, and, particularly, the impact that it could have on businesses in the current economic climate?

The Minister of the Environment: The existing PPS 4 would not have been as kind to business as the new PPS 4. The new PPS 4 will create opportunities for rural businesses to progress. That would not have happened under the old PPS 4. It will protect land that is zoned for business from residential development in a much stronger way than the previous PPS 4 would have, and it will create greater flexibility to develop a major infrastructural scheme such as the Titanic Quarter, which is concentrated on employment, whereas, previously, we might have had to step beyond the policies to grant such an approval.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome it. The Minister referred to sectors such as life sciences and food processing. In my constituency, there is a

difficulty in relation to an existing application. Will the policy be retrospective and apply to applications that are in the system?

In relation to the draft tourism strategy, I am disappointed that Lough Neagh did not feature strongly in the Minister's statement. Will he have any discussions with the tourism Minister in relation to the designation of Craigavon as a tourism centre, given its proximity to the southern shores of Lough Neagh?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 4 becomes a policy from today. Therefore, any live applications will be dealt with under that policy. The policy that I am looking at would give greater support for economic considerations than is currently the case. It would also look at projects that could negatively impact on existing businesses and, therefore, lead to a negative conclusion of a planning application if it would affect jobs and damage job opportunities. I hope, in the not-too-distant future, to get the approval of the Executive for that further policy and to bring it to the Floor of the House. It is important that we create a suite of planning policies that can sustain and support businesses.

Draft PPS 16 is a planning policy document. It is for the area plans to identify areas that are designated for tourism opportunity. However, if there are particular issues in relation to Craigavon and tourism that the Member wishes to raise, my door is always open for discussion on planning proposals, and I am sure that Minister Foster's door is always open for discussion on developing tourism opportunities. We will be happy to speak to the Member on those issues.

Lord Morrow: Today's statement is undoubtedly very welcome, as a number of people in our constituencies were waiting with bated breath to see what the Minister was going to say, particularly in relation to PPS 4. With the introduction of PPS 4, will the Minister confirm that there will be flexibility for economic development in rural communities? Many people are waiting for the statement to see what new things have been brought in from the existing PPS 4.

In relation to PPS 16, can the Minister be more explicit? He says that a hotel will be allowed in the countryside where the proposals involve redevelopment of an appropriate existing building. Can he tell us whether that covers any building? What does he have in mind?

The Minister of the Environment: There remains a significant supply of employment land in statutory plans. If we identify a shortage of land in any council area, an article 31 planning application can provide a mechanism by which suitable proposals can be considered through the development management system, rather than waiting for the preparation of a new area plan.

We also seek to protect zoned land and existing employment uses from unnecessary loss to alternative uses. We also wish to make provision for economic development proposals outwith development plans, such as redevelopment of existing employment sites in rural areas and proposals on the outskirts of small settlements where land is not available within them.

As for the development of buildings for hotels, and so forth, I do not think that developing an ordinary farmhouse or hay shed into a hotel would really stack up and create a plethora of development opportunities for hotels right across the country that would never actually be fulfilled. There are a lot of significant buildings in the countryside that would lend themselves to that practice. There are areas that have particular tourist needs. If those can be identified, there are opportunities for a level of development to take place. It does not create a free-for-all; that is not what we wish to do in bringing forward the document. A free-for-all is not good for tourism, nor is it good for business. There needs to be a means by which business can thrive and develop without creating opportunities for people who have no real interest in delivering something to simply jump on the bandwagon.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his statement, which strikes a good balance between economic development and protection of the countryside. I particularly welcome draft PPS 16 and its proposal to ban random, inappropriate and excessive development in the countryside. Does the Minister not agree that it conflicts with PPS 21, which has created bungalow blight in many of the most attractive areas of the countryside?

The Minister of the Environment: I was somewhat concerned that Mr Wilson had agreed with me on something. For a moment, I considered tendering my resignation. As he went on, however, it became fairly clear that we do not agree, so I am happy enough now.

Of course draft PPS 16 does not conflict with PPS 21. Draft PPS 16, PPS 21 and PPS 4 are a combination of policies that have been brought together and are built around sustainability. Sustainability does not mean doing nothing. I want to make that absolutely clear. There is a particular lobby that believes that doing nothing is sustainable. Doing nothing would lead to small villages becoming depopulated and losing their shops, facilities and employment opportunities. Church congregations would get smaller and churches would, possibly, have to close because the local population is in decline. That is not sustainable development. Sustainable development is about creating an opportunity for people to inhabit and live in rural communities in a way that does not impact negatively on them.

I challenge the Member on the issue of bungalow blight. We are not going down the Donegal route of creating a bungalow in every hole in the hedge. We have created our own planning policy, which is based on clusters. Where there is existing development, it can be added to or filled out in a way that is complementary to it and does not litter the countryside with bungalows that are dotted on every hill.

We are bringing forward and putting in place sustainable policies. The two particular policies that I have brought forward today will add to and enhance that, and will create development and employment opportunities for sustainable communities.

Mr T Clarke: Like my colleagues, I welcome the statement on PPS 4 and PPS 16. I have two questions for the Minister. In relation to PPS 16, an application has been in the system since 2007. It seems unfortunate that the Planning Service has brought it forward this week for refusal, because I see an extension to an aparthotel in Templepatrick, which is in my constituency. Surely that application could be revisited before a decision is issued?

For a number of years, Antrim Borough Council, in which I declare an interest as a member, has lobbied hard for economic development. The council believes that there have been insufficient lands in the borough for such development. How does the Minister know how much land is needed for economic and industrial development in the future?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 16 is a draft policy. Decisions cannot, therefore, be taken on the basis of that policy, but it should be a material consideration in the decision-making process. If the planning application has been in the system for three years and consultation with the council is taking place only now, this document will have relevance to any such application.

The Member asked about identifying the need for industrial land use. There are difficulties relating to the Antrim area plan and its current status. Perhaps we will deal with that in the very near future as we look at how area plans can be brought forward. There is no foolproof way of estimating the amount of land that is required for future growth. We provide advice on how to estimate future land requirements. That advice is based on past trends in the take-up of land, and we take in the views of councils, Departments and the local business community, together with emerging guidance from the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) major review of the regional development strategy. In 2009, a consultant study commissioned by DRD confirmed that there was unlikely to be a shortage of business land for the foreseeable future. In addition, as part of recent baseline monitoring with council transitional committees to help to inform future proposals, the Planning Service is undertaking preliminary work on the amount of industrial and business land available in development plans.

We must identify more land than might be used, because, if growth takes off and opportunities are created, we do not want to be in a position in which the Northern Ireland Government end up hindering those business opportunities. In the event of a period of growth, it is always good to have identified a surplus of land.

Welfare Reform

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Social Development that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): Members will be aware that this will be a rather lengthy statement. I assure Members that it is not an attempt to drive them out of the Chamber so that I can avoid questions. Rather, it is an attempt to rebalance the political and public debate in Northern Ireland by acknowledging the issues that relate to capital and revenue and, equally, to welfare.

The Assembly will recall that, on 28 September, it passed a motion on welfare reform. It was agreed:

"That this Assembly acknowledges Northern Ireland's high dependency on social security benefits; supports reforms which are aimed at simplifying the social security process and helping people to get back to work; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue his dialogue with the Department for Work and Pensions, stressing the need for the special social and economic circumstances of Northern Ireland to be carefully considered and urging the introduction of appropriate measures to ensure that the proposed welfare reforms do not have a disproportionately negative impact on Northern Ireland."

That was a significant motion. It recognised the ferocity of the benefit cuts being implemented and the scale of welfare reform being planned by the London Government. Given the motion and what has developed in respect of benefit cuts and welfare changes, even since 28 September, a mere eight weeks ago, I have an obligation to return to the Floor of the Assembly to give an account of where things reside. I also anticipate going before the Social Development Committee in the next two weeks to assess those and other related matters as we go forward.

11.15 am

In making the statement today, I have a number of objectives. The first is to outline the scale of benefit cuts that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the London Government are imposing in their June emergency Budget and October Budget. Secondly, I wish to scope out the welfare reform agenda now being disclosed by the Tory/Liberal coalition almost on a weekly basis. I anticipate that even this week there will be more announcements from Iain Duncan Smith in

respect of reform of the welfare process. Thirdly, I wish to detail the strategy that I have been pursuing to argue against benefit cuts on the one hand and the range of welfare changes on the other. Fourthly, I will explain how the Department for Social Development (DSD) is intervening and how, in my view, the Executive can intervene to protect those who are in need and are disadvantaged, critically over the next five years.

I will turn first to the scale of the benefit cuts detailed in the two London Budgets. In doing so, I recall what the Chancellor said in the opening words of his October Budget speech, when he explicitly and deliberately referred to “waste” and “welfare” in the same sentence. I found the association of those concepts — waste and welfare — in sequential words in an opening paragraph of a Budget statement revealing, and I considered it deeply wrong and deeply worrying.

Some £18 billion of welfare cuts are being imposed, driven through and carried forward. The read across of those welfare cuts to Northern Ireland is up to £500 million. That is money withdrawn from the pockets of people in need and from the economy. The London Government have announced a vast scale of changes involving a substantial reduction in payable benefits for mortgage interest, local housing allowance (LHA) and incapacity benefit. Those are complex, technical and difficult matters to fully grasp the significance of, but for the purposes of this statement, I will try to scope them out as best I can.

First, the support for mortgage interest (SMI) scheme has already reduced the interest payable from 6.08% to 3.63%. In addition, the SMI scheme for those who have claimed jobseeker's allowance since January 2009 is limited to 104 weeks. As I understand it, a person in that category will receive mortgage interest support for only two years. It appears that, after two years, people in that category will receive no support towards their mortgage interest. In the past number of days, I have tasked officials to scope out the significance of that intervention and measures and means to mitigate the impact on people who are in mortgage difficulties, mortgage arrears or who are at risk of losing their homes, especially given the potential for so many people to lose their jobs in the coming years.

From April 2011, a number of changes will be applied to LHA. LHA rates in the private-rented sector will be restricted according to the size of accommodation, and monetary caps will be introduced. Current statistics show that, in Northern Ireland, there are 454 households that will be directly affected by that change. From April 2011, excess payments — whereby claimants can receive up to £15 per week in addition to their award of housing benefit where the contractual rent is lower than the LHA rate for their property — will be removed. According to our figures, there are 7,247 claimants receiving excess payments of varying amounts up to £15 per week and 4,205 receiving excess payments of £5 or more.

With effect from October 2011, the LHA rate will be set at the thirtieth percentile of rents in each broad rental market area rather than, as at present, the fiftieth percentile. There are around 38,000 claimants receiving benefit assessed under the LHA scheme. The new change will result in an average reduction of awards to private sector claimants in Northern Ireland of £7 50 per week. That will represent an annual reduction of over £14 million in total and will be likely to place further pressure on the discretionary housing payment budget.

The Assembly will understand that this change will impact not only on claimants already affected by a restriction to the four-bedroom rate, but on the wider social market. That is a major change, with big consequences, which I will comment on later.

I move from LHA to incapacity benefit (IB). The Assembly will be aware that Northern Ireland has a significantly higher rate of incapacity benefit claimants than Britain. I resent the attempts made by the few in recent times to demonise those who happen to be on IB. There are good historical reasons for that situation; for instance, levels of multiple deprivation, the legacy of conflict, and how those manifest in the physical and mental capacity of many people. I resent the fact that so many people may wrongly feel that they are being targeted and demonised because they legitimately claim IB.

A programme reassessing all existing IB claimants will begin here in May 2011 that will see claimants moved onto employment support allowance or jobseeker's allowance. One estimate, which I think is fairly accurate, is that that could be around 23% of the approximately 90,000 current

claimants. Those people will then be deemed to be unemployed. That is one reason why some people fear that 80,000, 90,000 or 100,000 will be out of work in the coming years in Northern Ireland. Last Monday in the Assembly, I spoke to one person who has a particular knowledge of this matter. She said that there is the potential for 110,000 people to become unemployed. That would be as high as the figure that we experienced in the early 1980s.

In any case, given the context of the Northern Ireland labour market, it is unlikely that suitable work will be available for substantial numbers of claimants who may have limited skills or work experience. The difficulties of moving a significant number of individuals who have little or no skills or work experience to a benefit that requires them to seek work to and exist on a significantly lower level of income should not be underestimated. That is a crucial point. Limited work opportunities and increasing unemployment — a situation that may be compounded by the economic developments and borrowings in the Republic of Ireland — make a nonsense of proposals to get those who are capable of working back into work, when there is simply no work available.

As well as fundamental reform of the benefit system, the coalition Government have announced the implementation of the work programme. They say it is:

“a single integrated package of support providing personalised help for everyone who finds themselves out of work, regardless of the benefit they claim”.

It is claimed:

“It will focus on helping people into sustained jobs and pay delivery partners ... by the results they achieve”.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is moving quickly and aims to have the work programme in place by the summer of 2011. I support helping people who are capable of working to get into work. However, a return to the politics of Thatcher and Tebbit — out the door and on your bike — for a four-week programme is not the sustained, structured, personalised, long-term approach that is needed.

A second phase of benefit cuts is now beginning to roll out for the medium term. Those changes, which will depress the level of welfare support, will follow rapidly. From April 2012, the LHA

shared-room rate will be extended to cover single people aged 35 and under. The previous limit was 25 years. That could lead to greater numbers being homeless and pressure on services for homeless people in the context of difficult, domestic and home environments. Every Member will have had people in constituency offices or making contact with them about this matter. All Members appreciate that domestic and home environments can be very difficult sometimes for a range of serious, if not grave, circumstances. People have to try to get out of those properties and those living environments. This proposal will impede people from having the opportunity to do that, and could result in a greater level of homelessness. From April 2013, housing benefit claimants who are also claiming jobseeker's allowance will only receive their full housing benefit for a period of 12 months.

After that period, their benefit will be reduced by 10%, and they will be ineligible for the full out-of-work housing benefit rate until they have left the benefits system and have worked for a period. Currently, that change would affect approximately 22,500 claimants. It would put increased pressure on those who are dependent on housing benefit, with no rationale to try to get people back into work. I know that the issue is acknowledged and appreciated very much by Members because they have spoken to me in the past 24 hours about its impact.

To dramatise graphically what that particular proposal is about and highlight the particular severity and ferocity of the thinking behind it, let me recount a recent conversation that I had with a senior Tory. In defence of the proposal, he explained that if someone in a street lost their job, had to sell their home and downsize, then it was fair that a person living next door in rented accommodation should lose out, too. I understood, from the words of this senior Tory, that if someone loses out through no fault of their own and through circumstances beyond their control that give rise to them having to downsize and sell up their valued home, someone else living next door should lose out also, regardless of consequences. Members can make their own judgement on that. In my view, it is one of the most abhorrent of the welfare proposals, revealing a dogmatic hand. I will come back to that point later.

A further change to housing benefit will see linked changes to child tax credit to

remove what is known as the baby element. Approximately 1,085 claimants who qualify for increased housing benefit family premium will see a reduction of up to £7 a week for rent and £2 a week for rates. The regulation to implement that change was debated at the Committee for Social Development last week. I wanted to test the temperature of the Committee to see how far Members may wish to go to challenge parity or to take measures to protect those in need as a result of the proposed regulation. I will comment further on that later.

All this is coming down the pipe to the people of Northern Ireland over the next one or two years. However, I want to scope out the scale of the proposed welfare reform agenda of the British Government, which will result in a more fundamental reworking of welfare over the next number of years. In my view, it will mean the most significant change to the welfare regime in 40 years.

The review is the work of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith. As I think I have said in the Chamber before, when one meets him, he is not the man one sees on television. He appears to have deep convictions around the issues of welfare, he has strong views about how welfare should be reformed, and he is acting as best he can to achieve what he is proposing. That may be the case, but I fundamentally differ from him in some of his approaches.

The most significant reform in 40 years will remodel the welfare system into something very different. It will cost billions of pounds to implement; billions that will be funded in part by the Chancellor's up-front benefit cuts in the two Budgets of this year. There are principles behind welfare reform that could unite many. We should provide assistance to people who are capable of work to help them to move from long-term benefit reliance to the self-sufficiency of work. When people make that transition, it should pay them to work. However, from a purely Northern Ireland perspective, acknowledging that some elements of the proposals may make sense in the prosperous south of England, the measures announced look like a major onslaught on low-income households.

I will touch on a number of measures. Changes to disability allowance are focused on those who are of working age and will involve a new

medical assessment that is akin to the work capability assessment that is applied to those who are on incapacity benefit. I understand that further consultation proposals in that regard are imminent.

11.30 am

Changes are also planned to the social fund. It is proposed in Britain to transfer community care grants, funeral payments and crisis loans to local authorities, with loan schemes being considered for outsourcing to the voluntary sector. Winter fuel payments and cold weather payments are to be retained by DWP, which advised that social fund proposals for reform may be advanced over the next two weeks. I have raised that issue and its management with DWP Ministers.

The coalition Government's plans for the state pension are to speed up the pace of state pension age equalisation for women from April 2016, which is an interesting date, so that women's state pension age reaches 65 in November 2018. The state pension age will then increase to 66 for men and women from December 2018 to April 2020. Following the faster increase to 66 years, the Government are also considering future increases to state pension age.

I understand that changes are being considered to child maintenance. I want to protect the very positive work that the child maintenance enforcement division (CMED) has taken forward over recent years in support of children. It was not long ago that the Child Support Agency, as it was then known, was not an institution that earned public confidence, never mind family and parental confidence. CMED has turned that around substantially and, recently, it initiated a stakeholder group to build the relationship between those in the child sector and the agency to make sure that deeper confidences develop. I understand that officials in DWP are working on options in that regard, and I have spoken and written to Maria Miller to reduce the risk of undermining CMED when child-support mechanisms are now better accepted in the context of the need for stability amid the turbulence that is created by aggressive reform.

Through the recent publication of the White Paper on universal credit, which is a fundamental document with immense impact, the Secretary of State has signalled the coalition Government's intention to introduce

universal credit to replace a range of working-age benefits, including income support, income-related employment and support allowance, income-related jobseeker's allowance, child tax credit, working tax credit, housing benefit and some aspects of the social fund. The stated aim of the universal credit is to reform the system of benefits and tax credits for people of working age to improve work incentives, reduce benefit dependency and simplify the system.

The London Government also claim that universal credit seeks to improve the transition between inactivity and work; improve usability for the individual and reduce administration by reducing the number of different benefits, delivery agencies and processes; and make sure that work pays by simplifying the interaction between entitlement and earnings by increasing the amount of earnings that people can have without losing benefits and reducing the rate at which benefit is withdrawn as earnings rise.

As I have said already, there are principles with which many could agree, but I have deep and growing concerns about the changes that have been announced already. It seems that the process is designed substantially to lower the platform of welfare support from which the universal credit proposals will be launched in two years' time. That is a key point for the London Government: if the welfare platform is reduced, top-line expenditure can be cut as a preamble to reform. There are real dangers for us. Northern Ireland is unlikely to come out of recession for at least two years and already experiences some of the highest levels of deprivation in Britain. There are real legacies of the conflict that involve many thousands of our most vulnerable people who are dependent on social welfare. Furthermore, welfare reform that is seen to compound the experience of the most vulnerable, for example, through increased homelessness, may create instability.

The reason that I wanted to detail the narrative of the first, second and third phases of welfare cuts and reform is to demonstrate the relentless designs of the British Government to rework benefit and welfare in the image of something different from what has been heretofore and, arguably, to what has been in place for the past 40 years. The scale of that narrative conveys the scale of the issue and, therefore, should convey the scale of our response to me, as Minister, to the Executive and to the Assembly.

I turn now to that response. Although social security is a devolved matter, we are constrained by funding issues. Any variance from DWP social security rates and conditions may breach parity. It would be thoughtless folly, therefore, if I, as the Minister for Social Development, took action that put in greater need those already in need. Parity brings a net benefit to Northern Ireland measured in billions of pounds. One figure given to me recently suggests that when the total tax take in Northern Ireland that goes to the Treasury is deducted from the total Budget and welfare payments that come across the Irish Sea, the net benefit to the Executive and the Assembly is at least £3 billion. Nevertheless, I believe that the issue of parity should be considered and scoped, although doing that in a rush would hurt those whom we need to protect most over the next four or five very difficult years.

As I said, some principles in the universal credit proposals may have some attraction, such as those providing for the simplification of the system, clearer conditionality and better financial support for people moving off benefits and into work. However, many changes to the level of benefit support that are already being introduced will reduce significantly the support available through social welfare, impacting on tens of thousands of people and having a depressing effect on our regional economy.

What has been my and DSD's response to date? I will not outline all of the Department's thinking, the issues that we are scoping or the responses that we may introduce or propose. However, I will scope in broad detail the range of responses that I have undertaken as Minister in the past number of months. First, as Members are aware and as was reflected in the motion that the Assembly passed in September, I have engaged on an ongoing basis the London Ministers in DWP: Iain Duncan Smith; Lord Freud; Chris Grayling; and Maria Miller. They are in no doubt about my view that, be it on the Budget or on benefits, particular circumstances here — higher levels of deprivation, as in parts of Britain, compounded by the legacy of conflict and the risk of alienation — mean that London should have a particular response to our needs.

If Ministers in London tell me that they accept that analysis — as they do, because Iain Duncan Smith, Lord Freud and Maria Miller have told me so — they must accept the consequences of it. In my view, that means, or could mean, additional funds; hardship

provisions; recognition of local factors; or the ability to opt out, slow down or reconfigure reforms in the image of our circumstances. If it does not mean that — I am fearful that, for all that London Ministers tell me, they will not act on what they tell me — London will carry on regardless in the face of evidence, disregarding the very circumstances that they say that they recognise.

I will meet Lord Freud again next Monday, and, as I outlined, my discussions will be informed by a number of principles. The planned changes should be implemented in a manner that recognises the difficulties in areas of high unemployment in general and that has regard to Northern Ireland's particular circumstances. I will argue for the maximum flexibility to be allowed when implementing changes. As Members will be aware from the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill before the summer, there has been some flexibility to date. I want to expand on that, and I am actively scoping how that might be achieved.

Where appropriate, I will seek to introduce changes more slowly, because it is likely to take Northern Ireland longer to come out of the current economic recession. To follow slavishly the London Government's design and timeline for welfare reform, without measuring it against the particular historical, current and, in the light of the economic downturn, future circumstances, is not credible, mature or a considered way in which to proceed.

In addition, I plan to manage welfare change — if manage it I must — in a way that deals with the real-time objective needs of the various categories of people who may be in need. Given differences in age profiles and economic background, welfare reform may be directed towards one category or group of individuals rather than another.

Moreover, because of the ongoing research that I am undertaking, on which I will comment shortly, and the consequential assessments that will be made, DSD, the Social Security Agency (SSA) and the Executive will be in a position to identify the fault lines, gaps and dangers of welfare reform, and argue, plan or legislate against them.

It is my very strong view that, if welfare reform is to be sustainable and practical, it should be introduced in phases, and slowly. All the evidence suggests that to go for the big bang

in welfare reform, will, over time, cause it to unravel, create disproportionate difficulties and hurt, in an even greater sense, those who are most in need. By my Department doing the research that identifies how welfare reform may have an impact, and where the fault lines, gaps and dangers are, we will have an early start in arguing with London and in deciding among ourselves what the best responses should be.

There are other principles that, for the purpose of best negotiations and outcomes with and from London, I shall not outline here. However, the objective is more freedom, and/or more resources and/or more independence, in a way that will not adversely affect the block grant or the net billions of pounds paid in benefits to our citizens and communities. As I said, making assessments about all those matters, and where they lead us, is crucial. That is why I have made it clear to DSD and to the SSA that, in ensuring that people have quick and efficient access to benefits, they do not simply do welfare. The Department and the SSA must challenge, interrogate and manage welfare for the benefit of our citizens, and I have taken three steps to do so.

Research has been commissioned that will provide information on the consequences of the changes announced by the coalition Government. Research will identify the impact of new procedures on assessing people's capability for work through the new employment support allowance (ESA), and those who will be in receipt of incapacity benefit (IB) from April 2011. Further work will tell us how the new procedures will affect those who have been disengaged from the labour market for a long time and what their needs might be. As I have already said, Northern Ireland could lose up to £500 million payable in benefits during the SR10 period. Therefore, I have also commissioned work that will tell us what the consequences of the cuts that have been announced to date by the coalition Government will be for the incomes of those who are dependent on welfare benefits.

At the same time, I have been consulting widely on what our best response should be to the recently announced cuts and the longer-term plans for universal credit. I believe that by availing myself of the best advice from DSD and from community experts and organisations, I will have access to evidence to create a basis for protecting and materially helping those in need.

The Department and the SSA have been instructed to identify what it would cost and how it would be done were the Belfast Government to deploy a number of interventions to protect those in need and mitigate the Budget cuts. I shall not detail the shape of all that, because it would betray my hand in advance of the meeting with Lord Freud in six days' time. It is still a work in progress. Costings are being worked up and the interventions may, in some cases, require Executive endorsement. A range of interventions may be required, including financial and personal assistance, advocacy and other measures to protect those in need. This is the point at which I return to my comments about the impact of a reduction in mortgage interest support, the attempt to undo the baby element of child tax credit and the other most severe welfare changes. We must ask ourselves if and how we can intervene on those and other matters.

I am also attempting to bring together some of the best practitioners of welfare issues to bear down on the welfare changes and proposals and work out all the best responses. Experts in the social welfare field are working with officials to plan our response to the already announced cuts and the longer-term plans for universal credit. Officials are working with Professor Eileen Evason, Les Allamby from the Northern Ireland Law Centre, and the economist Philip McDonagh to monitor the impact of the wider welfare changes.

A group involving Advice NI, Citizens Advice, the Housing Rights Service and the Housing Executive is considering the impact of reductions in the mortgage interest scheme, and Professor Malcolm Harrington will soon review the impact of using the work capability assessment here. I have also tasked a group of senior officials with monitoring and advising me on the changes that will be necessary to ensure that the implementation of the changes under universal credit are taken forward in a manner that is relevant to meet Northern Ireland's circumstances.

11.45 am

I will resolutely oppose certain proposed changes, such as the 10% cut in housing benefit for those on jobseekers allowance (JSA) for more than 12 months. I want to identify how to offset the damage and, indeed, to determine whether there are ways to avoid the cut's

implementation here. That is an issue of fundamental fairness, and I recognise that it is also an issue of parity. I do not shirk any of that; we should begin to address all of it. I am also taking forward work that will complement my actions on welfare reform, which are designed to protect those most in need. I recognise that issues of welfare cannot be taken or addressed in isolation. People who rely on benefits substantially rely on social housing, and, therefore, questions on access to welfare cannot be divorced from those on access to housing.

This is not the Assembly statement in which to expand too much on housing issues. However, I plan to return to the Assembly before Christmas with a further statement on housing responses in times of need. That shall build and expand on my predecessor's new housing agenda, which defined new territory for housing policy. The statement, which will be titled 'Housing Responses in Times of Need' will aim to build the maximum number of homes; herald the necessary reform of housing associations, Mr Craig; create mechanisms to ensure that public moneys for housing use are best spent; and initiate fresh attempts and deepen ongoing attempts at positive housing reform. It will establish more fully the welfare/housing axis and identify real time solutions for the protection of those in need.

Some initiatives are ongoing. Through the Housing Rights Service, work has already begun to protect those who risk losing their homes because of difficulties with mortgage repayments. The mortgage debt advice service has already advised 755 clients. Homelessness has been prevented in 180 cases, and 16 potential evictions have been cancelled. The Housing Rights Service estimate that a minimum of £1.2 million has been saved to the public purse through avoiding potential homelessness. I am working to extend that scheme until 2015. The funding for a mortgage rescue scheme, which has been often refused, must now be approved, and, as I said earlier, I will take a range of initiatives to protect those in mortgage stress. I will inform the Social Development Committee about that work in due course.

Fuel poverty is part of the welfare narrative. The fuel poverty figures are high, many are dependent on oil, prices are rising, and there is virtually no energy brokering. In light of that, government has the means and the will to do more. Again, I will not detain the Assembly much

on that issue, but I may make a statement shortly when I launch a fuel poverty strategy for times of need. I aim to stretch the limits of what can be done and not only build on the good work in energy efficiency but break new ground in energy brokering. We cannot ignore the two major determinants of fuel poverty, namely low incomes and high fuel prices.

The point of all of this is clear: we should proof government spending and public initiatives against the welfare test and ask whether spending, policy or government initiatives better the circumstances of those on welfare. No aspect of government is excluded, and that means procurement, too. I will do what can be done through discussions with London, through working with the Department and the Social Security Agency, and through developing interventions to address what is already a serious and potentially grave situation. However, in my judgement and certainly in my heart, more can be done.

I will not detain the Assembly by talking about the ongoing Budget negotiations, save to make one point. The family of responsibilities in the Department, namely welfare, housing, child maintenance and neighbourhood renewal, are all about people, families, communities, lone parents and older citizens who are in need and in disadvantage. If one essential value of the Budget is not to protect them, it will not be much of a Budget, and we will not be much of a Government. However, the Executive will need to decide and agree on what measures, beyond the funds of DSD, will be needed to achieve the objective of protecting those in need.

I shall forward to the Executive a remedies paper in which I will include a wider analysis of how we should take forward the issue of social welfare. It will recommend a range of interventions as part of the Budget conclusions on welfare, fuel poverty and housing that the Executive should endorse if we are to be judged favourably and judge ourselves favourably on how we address the severity of welfare changes.

I will do what can be done on AME to mitigate the benefit impact, but, as an Executive, including DSD, we should do what can be done on the departmental expenditure limit if we are to offset the ferocity of London welfare decisions. I am encouraged that my Executive colleagues acknowledge that the jigsaw of our finances over the next four years is made up

not only of the revenue budget and the capital budget but of the welfare budget and how that works itself through in the lives of our citizens.

People say that there will be 100,000 people unemployed and that there will be a wave of poverty. Only two weeks ago, the head of an educational organisation used that description to me. We must be vigilant and act against such a possibility. The people of Northern Ireland have a resilience that has been proven in times of threat and terror. Our people are well skilled, well educated and, given a fair chance, well placed to go forward positively. In doing so, the test of our wisdom and maturity is how we protect those on welfare and in need. We must not let them down.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton):

I welcome the Minister's statement, and, given its length, I thank him for keeping the Assembly well briefed about the impact of the proposed changes to the social security system. He and I may not always see eye to eye on every detail of welfare reform, but we are as one in our opposition to the coalition's crude cuts to welfare, which will have a severely detrimental impact on the vulnerable people in our society.

Can the Minister inform the House of any deliberations that he has had with the Department for Work and Pensions on the possible retention of AME savings that are made as a result of expenditure from our Budget? Will he agree that, although we should, as we always have, test what flexibility there is in the social security system and test welfare reform, any step that the Executive take that breaches parity and which puts under threat the over £3 billion in welfare subvention that we receive every year would be a step too far?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I acknowledge that, as Chairperson of the Committee and as an MLA, Mr Hamilton has demonstrated that, whatever passing differences we may have on one or two issues, especially on the issue of parity, we are on the same page when it comes to the severity and ferocity of what London has been doing. I have made the point previously that, in October, when the Chancellor partnered the words "waste" and "welfare" and outlined £7 billion of further cuts on top of the £11 billion of cuts that had been outlined in June's emergency Budget, it hit deeply, including with

the political community in Northern Ireland. That is why I welcome the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee and the motion to which he spoke a number of weeks ago. I welcome the fact that, by and large, we are on the same page.

A conversation has taken place with the Treasury on the issue of saving money from AME. For example, as a result of various fraud interventions by the Social Security Agency, the amount of fraud might be reduced, thereby reducing the amount of money being paid under AME. There was a discussion about the potential that all or part of those savings thereby identified would come back to the Department. That conversation was initiated, but I am advised by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) that it was concluded in the context of the Budget announcement on the block grant for Northern Ireland. I regret that, and I believe that there might still be some opportunity to exploit the potential that part or all of any savings from AME, for example, arising from fraud intervention measures that reduce the cost to the London Exchequer, could be retained by the Department.

I am anxious that any Barnett consequentials passed to the Northern Ireland Executive under the block grant to fund the implementation of welfare reform, especially as it begins to accelerate over the next two to three years, come across to the Department in full. There are ongoing conversations to determine whether the Barnett consequentials for welfare reform, on both the capital and revenue sides, have been transferred in full.

I will not put those in need into further need unnecessarily through a reckless approach to parity. However, I will stretch the limits of parity in a way that does not prejudice the block grant or those who are on benefits. That is part of the conversation with Lord Freud. We must maximise the opportunities within the constraints of parity. Parity is contentious and cross-cutting and is of interest to Executive colleagues. I may be minded to break parity. However, if I were, it would go nowhere unless the Executive said, "This is a line in the sand that we will not compromise on."

As I have indicated, one of the lines in the sand has to be the proposal to reduce housing benefit by 10% after one year when a person has claimed jobseeker's allowance. The

punitive nature of that intervention invites me and, I think, Members and Executive colleagues to determine whether that is a right and sustainable approach that we should consider in the context of parity. Beyond that, as I have indicated in a remedies paper to the Executive, there may be opportunities without compromising parity whereby the Executive decide to protect those in need, over and above whatever interventions might come from DSD. I hope that, at the very least, when the Executive see the remedies paper, they may see fit to endorse it.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, but I certainly do not welcome it because he has, rightly, given us a litany of doom and gloom for the past 40 minutes or so. Does the Minister agree that these are not significant changes to the welfare system but, in fact, the dismantling of the welfare state as we know it? He talked about scoping out parity, but does he also agree that until the fundamental tenet of parity is challenged, the "reforms" will go through? I am not sure how, unless parity is challenged, people who are already being impacted on so greatly can be impacted on even more. The changes that we are talking about would have the greatest impact since the inception of the welfare state in 1948.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question, particularly because I was a little fearful that he would ask me a technical question on some of the changes. I would certainly defer to the Member's knowledge on many of these matters, so I am grateful that the question is more political than technical.

We can perceive the Chancellor's political narrative in the decisions made in the June to October Budget and in his use of language. It was also shown in the dogmatic comments that were made by others at a senior level in the Tory party to me and Danny Kennedy, who was at the same meeting. I fear that that commentary means the dismantling of the welfare state as we know it. I have to acknowledge that. I think that Iain Duncan Smith has more lofty ambitions.

He has genuine conviction about remodelling the welfare benefit system in a way that simplifies it, makes work pay and encourages people out of welfare reliance and into self-sufficiency through work. His character and the

colour of his ambitions are different from those of the Chancellor, who wants narrower and more aggressive welfare cuts. Iain Duncan Smith has achieved his objective, through universal credit, of a fundamental reworking of that system. However, the Chancellor has also achieved his ambition of massive and ferocious upfront benefit cuts, which was the price paid for Mr Duncan Smith's getting what he wanted.

12.00 noon

I wish to make one comment about parity, with which I will not play political games. I believe that we, along with the Dublin Government and others who have an interest, should begin to scope the future shape of welfare benefits to see whether there are any adjustments or reconfigurations that might serve our interests better. As I indicated before, that is why Éamon Ó Cuív, the Minister with responsibility for welfare in the South, and I decided some time ago to begin to scope the shape of welfare benefits. Blue-sky and long-term thinking are required, but they do not need to be implemented or considered immediately. Nonetheless, we must stand back and look at those issues in the round and in a more fundamental way.

Is the Member saying to me that this is the moment to fundamentally challenge parity and to put on the table our position about whether we want Northern Ireland to retain or to jettison the £3 billion of net financial gain? Is the Member asking me whether we should put all that on the table and negotiate with the British Government today or this week? If so, I must say to him that today or this week is not the time to do that because, given the number of people who may become unemployed and the range and severity of benefit cuts and revenue and capital cuts, it would set up the people in the North for an even more disproportionate impact on their lives.

Let us scope that to see whether we can begin to have ownership of corporation tax and enterprise zones and responsibility for our financial affairs. However, let us do it on a judicious, measured and ongoing basis rather than rushing into putting parity on the table when we have not worked through the full cost consequences of that, never mind the full consequences of it on those in need. The British Government may want a conversation with us about parity, so that they can fundamentally

adjust the block grant and reduce the cost benefit of parity to Northern Ireland in a way that would damage the stability and lives of many of our citizens.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I draw Members' attention to the fact that someone's mobile phone is on and is interfering with the system.

Mrs M Bradley: The Minister would not get any votes on 'The X Factor' for this morning's report; that is for sure. We all have great cause for enormous concern about the benefit cuts outlined. Nevertheless, I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree that the 10% cut in housing benefit for those who get jobseeker's allowance for more than 12 months is particularly mean-spirited?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for her question. I tried to outline, realistically and honestly, what the issues and problems are and what the solutions might be. Regardless of whether those solutions are within the gift of DSD or the Executive or are as a consequence of negotiations with London, I am trying to maximise the answers, not simply pose questions. I took this opportunity to make a statement to try to demonstrate that we are trying to leave no stone unturned in responding to the situation.

If members of the Committee have any suggestions about other stones that need to be upturned in the way that Mr Brady suggested, my door is open to them. I am willing to hear those suggestions and scope them out.

Social security and the core DSD staff who deal with welfare do great work. That is why I brought in, on a structured basis, people such as Professor Eileen Evason, who know the inside track on welfare in Northern Ireland. I brought those people in to the SSA and to DSD to advise me personally so that any opportunities to deal with a solution could be maximised.

The proposal to cut housing benefit by 10% after jobseeker's allowance has been received for one year was not just mean-spirited, it was dogmatic, callous and uncaring. It is one of those measures that, in the fullness of time, I think even the House of Commons will baulk at. That is one reason why I have not tabled some of the recommendations that have come across my desk to date.

Dr Farry: I share and understand the concerns that the Minister outlined. However, will he clarify his position on parity? He issued a statement today that, as he confirmed in his answer to Mr Hamilton, talked about potentially breaching parity. However, he then gave a sterling defence of parity in his response to Mr Brady. There is a danger that a mixed message is going out on the matter.

What common cause is the Minister trying to make with his counterparts in Scotland and Wales? In trying to address through Westminster those concerns and the wider interrelated issue of a lack of a proper UK regional policy, what use is the Minister making of Northern Ireland MPs and those MPs from other poorer parts of the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in the closing words of my answer to the previous question, I believe that there are opportunities through the House of Commons to derail one or more of the proposals. That is why I said that, in the fullness of time, even the House of Commons will balk at the proposal to reduce housing benefit by 10% after one year. The narrative that I gave of my conversation with a senior Tory and of the way that he framed the proposal was very revealing. Being so revealing gives plenty of opportunity for Members of the House of Commons to resist that proposal.

I will be exploring and exploiting any opportunities through MPs. Given that there is unanimity on the matter in this Chamber and given the motion that was passed on 28 September, it falls to all Members and all parties to communicate between here and the House of Commons to ensure that there are opportunities to deal with it. However, that goes beyond my responsibilities as a Minister and as a member of a political party with representatives in the House of Commons.

I have had some brief conversations with a Minister and Members from the Scottish Parliament. I note that, last week, the Scottish Parliament passed only a one-year Budget. I very much hope that we do not follow that example. I very much believe that we should have a four-year Budget. People deserve, especially in the run-up to Christmas and into the new year, certainty about their futures, including their job prospects. Whatever conversations we have with people in Scotland,

where the circumstances are similar, we must remember that our circumstances are, in my view, more complex and compound need more greatly. Although we may have conversations with the devolved Scottish Administration, I hope that we do not follow their example of having a one-year Budget.

Let me again create certainty and avoid doubt on the issue of parity. In my statement, I suggested that, in my view, to rush head-on into dealing with parity would be thoughtless folly. I have to say that I do not think that that is sending out mixed messages. In my view, it is sending out a very blunt message that it would be thoughtless folly to rush head-on into the issue of parity. I discussed how we may deal with the issue of parity and said that it would be dealt with in the longer term. We are going to scope out, through blue-sky thinking, what the shape of welfare may be in the longer term, including the shape of welfare on the island of Ireland.

I will push parity to the limit. In recent years, and before I or my predecessor took office, things may have been done differently in Northern Ireland, and they may have been technically inconsistent with parity. Therefore, parity is not something that is never compromised. Indeed, as a result of what are known as operational flexibilities, and because of our particular circumstances and our decisions on how best to intervene to protect those in need, we may do some things that are in the interest of Northern Ireland rather than of parity. I want to extend and maximise operational flexibilities to enable us to do that.

I will make two last points on Dr Farry's question. First, if parity and parity legislation were to be slavishly followed, some consequences of that would be so detrimental and prejudicial to the interests of those in need that the Executive would have to seriously consider whether to intervene and find the funding to mitigate their impact. Secondly, I may have a view on parity, push its limits and be inclined, in my private moments, to break from it because of my concern at what London is doing. However, the decision to move away from parity is a cross-cutting and controversial matter, which requires Executive endorsement. I may go to the Executive and scope ways to take that matter forward. That would be a more rounded and multi-dimensional way of dealing with the

issue than making parity a god that we dare not offend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, someone's mobile phone is switched on. Will Members please check that their mobile phones are switched off?

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement, although some elements of the welfare reform proposals are quite worrying. The Minister did not mention disability living allowance (DLA) in his statement, and rumours abound that certain elements of it will disappear. Will the Minister update the House on whether that is the case and whether DLA will form part of the proposed universal credit system?

The Minister mentioned that some people who are on incapacity benefit will be moved to employment support allowance. Will there be an appeals mechanism for those who feel that they have been unjustly moved? Finally, the Minister mentioned that he would "resolutely oppose" a 10% cut in housing benefit for those on jobseeker's allowance? Will the Minister outline what he means by "resolutely oppose" and what that opposition will entail?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his questions, and I will deal with them in the order in which they were asked. I will not indulge the rumours of others — not Mr Easton, but others outside the Chamber — on what may or may not happen with DLA. However, we are close to the announcement on the next phase of welfare reform that DWP wants to commence. That announcement may come this week or next week, but it is coming soon, and it will include a further fundamental review and assessment of DLA.

There will be an appeals mechanism for those who migrate from IB to ESA, but the Member's question is timely and appropriate. I have asked officials, through their work with the people whom I named, who are external to the SSA and DSD, to find out what patterns are emerging among the appeals and successful appeals of those who were moved from IB to ESA. I will correct the record if I am in error, and Members should not rely too heavily on this figure, but I understand that 40% of those who enter the appeals process are successful.

Therefore, the question arises of whether there is a pattern or system that we need to look at and adjust so that people who move across do not lose their entitlement to the employment

and support allowance and have to go through the appeals system. The appeals system may throw up lessons about how we administer migration to the employment and support allowance. If there is learning and guidance that can be offered to those in the social security offices who make the assessments, we should give that assistance to our staff so that consistent good evidence and due process enable people to get the benefit that they are entitled to rather than their having to go through an appeals system that leads to 40% of successful appeals.

12.15 pm

I am resolutely opposed to the cut, and, earlier, I tried to answer the question on how I am resolutely opposed to it. A system that seems to me, both politically and personally, to be engineered to penalise one person because someone else has suffered does not have any rationale, evidence base or value beyond wanting to penalise the person who lives next door. There should be a principle to intervene to help a person in mortgage stress. If that does not work and someone loses their house and has to downsize, the obligation to try to help the person who is living nearby in rented accommodation should not be diminished or diluted. That is the ethic.

I will resolutely oppose that cut by seeing whether DSD and/or the Executive can intervene to help those people, including financially. The cost consequences of such intervention may be so elaborate that it is not feasible, or the cost consequences may be secondary to the fact that thousands of people in that position will need help. As I indicated to Mr Farry, this is one measure that has the potential to be derailed. This Chamber and the House of Commons should gather forces. We should argue how offensive the proposal is in any conversations that we have with any British Government Minister. If we speak as one and work through the House of Commons and any other political mechanism, we will be able to derail that proposal.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. In his opening remarks, he mentioned people leaving the Chamber. I am sorry now that I did not make my escape.

In his statement, the Minister talked about protecting those most in need. Can the Minister

give an assurance that, when he meets Ministers and goes to London, his priority is to protect the most vulnerable rather than to attack them? That is what will happen under the reform. Given the proposed changes in Britain, how does he envisage the social fund being administered? What training will staff receive? Does the Minister believe that current staffing levels are adequate for implementing the changes?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for those questions. I am tempted to say that the word “escape” may not be the most appropriate language for a Sinn Féin representative to use. It has historical significance rather than current significance.

The Member picks up what has been proposed in the social fund. In my conversations with Lord Freud, I have made it very clear that the proposal in England, Wales and Scotland to administer the social fund through councils is not a model that we should employ here. The powers, character and nature of our council and local government framework are different to those in Britain. We should have the ability to continue to deliver the social fund in a way that is fit for purpose rather than create new architecture through councils that have not had that function for a long period.

Therefore, the model and mechanism being proposed in Britain are not what we want to see here. I am not often tempted to guess when it comes to the intentions of the British Government, but if I were to do so, I would say that we will win the argument about the delivery mechanism in Northern Ireland when it comes to what the proposed delivery mechanisms through local councils in Britain might be.

When it comes to the issue of staffing in social security offices, I am anxious. I have said, and I will say again now, that Social Security Agency front line staff are part of the family of front line staff. If there is going to be a situation in which there are increasing numbers of unemployed people, we need to have sufficient numbers of front-facing staff in our social security offices to do the work. If there are cuts to the number of front line staff or disproportionate cuts to the Social Security Agency and its budget, there will be people in need coming into social security offices and not enough staff to help them to access benefits and to answer their questions.

That leads me to the wider point: those who work in neighbourhood renewal, housing, CMED,

social security, nursing, teaching and other professions are all front line people who must be protected in the Budget outcomes.

I heard what the Member said about training. I will provide him with a written answer that will give him the details of the conversations that we have had with the new head of the Social Security Agency, Mr O'Reilly, about further training to ensure that staff are fully tuned into the management of benefits.

As I indicated earlier, training and guidance are ways of ensuring that people who go to the agency get all the benefits to which they are entitled, instead of losing out and having to go through an appeal. Therefore, training, as a strategy to address need and to help people to maximise their benefit entitlement, is one way of dealing with the developing situation on welfare reform and benefit cuts.

Mr Craig: Following that train of thought, I had the opportunity last week to visit the fraud department in DSD. One of the interesting statistics that I was told during my visit was that 83,000 errors in the system are investigated by that department annually. Does that not indicate to the Minister that there is a need for additional training, or maybe retraining, of some employees in the Department?

The Minister said that it would be thoughtless folly to ignore parity completely. He well knows my opinions on some of the reforms. I think that the reforms are counterproductive in some respects. However, even thinking through the reduction on mortgage interest rate relief, does the Minister agree that breaking parity on that issue would involve not just making up the extra fund from the interest that was reduced? Does the Minister accept that we would be handing the Tory-led Government the opportunity to do away with all mortgage relief payments, which would leave the Executive in a completely invidious situation?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his questions. It is very useful when Members bear down on particular issues across the field of ministerial responsibility. That is why the persistent questions from the Member on the issue of fraud and error in the Social Security Agency are very useful interventions in ensuring that where there are opportunities to do more in respect of fraud or error, we take them.

I am not aware of the figure of 83,000, but my intuition tells me that those 83,000 errors are not all staff errors. There are categories of error way beyond the responsibility and control of social security staff. Many of those errors will arise from customers giving information that is inaccurate and incomplete and that needs to be checked. My intuition tells me that the balance of error may significantly not be the responsibility of social security staff.

As I indicated to Mr Boylan, if any fine-tuning of training is required with regard to staff error, Members can rest assured that the Department, the Social Security Agency and I will address that. Critically, if more interventions in training are needed to ensure that our staff manage the system with due process and good evidence to ensure that people get all the benefits they are entitled to, we will do that.

I made it clear that we should not rush into the issue of parity with regard to mortgage interest support. As I indicated, I would not necessarily rely on the British Government and not take the opportunity to open issues in a way that we are not prepared for, have not scoped out fully, have not assessed the impact of completely and in a way that only puts those in need in greater need. However, we should be robust and exhaustive in our conversation with London about mortgage interest support and in our conversation in the Executive to identify whether there is anything that we can do. Let us remember that people are, as I understand it, entitled to that scheme for only two years. After the two years are up, which will begin to happen in January 2011 for claimants in Northern Ireland, they will not get mortgage support for up to 39 weeks after they go onto jobseeker's allowance.

That is why I am taking forward particular work on mortgage arrears and repossessions. I want to acknowledge a very useful paper that was provided to me in October by Advice Northern Ireland and a letter that I received from the organisation in early November that encouraged me and the Department to go in certain directions. Arising from that information, I issued instructions that the Department should go in certain directions to deal with the issue of people in mortgage arrears and at risk of repossession, a situation that I think will become more acute.

Mr McCallister: I apologise to the Minister for having to nip out and miss part of his

statement. He said that he agreed with some of the principles of the reforms set out by the coalition, namely that work is a positive and contributes much. Does he agree that the current system, with over 30-something benefits, is very complex and that we have to change? When breaking with any of the parity principles, is there not a huge danger for the Budget terms as we know them? When he breaks parity on any issue, there is a huge risk to the block grant.

The Minister for Social Development: I agree with the Member: there is no doubt that welfare benefits are far too complex and simplification is needed. I do not think that there is any dispute among any party about that. There was no dispute in any responses to a recent welfare consultation from people involved in giving advice. The advice was that the system needs to be simplified and less complex. I completely concur with that.

The danger is that although universal credit may simplify the system, in the meantime, London is driving down the welfare baseline so that, under the guise of reform, we actually have the impact of benefit cuts.

12.30 pm

Over the next two or three years, as the cost of rolling out universal credit becomes more obvious, as the complexity becomes clearer and the difficulties become more certain, I am worried that the London Government will decide that the only way in which they can fund it is to make further benefit cuts. Therefore, whatever about the two phases of the benefit cuts, I am worried that, in 2013, we will discover that the up-front costs of welfare reform are so extravagant and the proposal so complicated that more money will have to be put into it, and welfare reform will need to be funded from a third phase of benefit cuts. I do not discount that possibility.

I repeat that we should stretch parity, we should challenge it, and we should try to find ways of going around and through it. In the longer term, we need to scope the whole issue of parity. Where we are unable to break parity or mitigate the consequences of it in our own legislation, DSD and the Executive may find reason and good grounds to intervene to mitigate the consequences of what parity might mean for law and policy in the North. That is how I will deal with parity. I will not rush in here and tell

Members that now is the time to break parity fundamentally and substantially, because that is how people in need will be put in greater need, and it will create an opportunity for the British Government to say that if we want to breach parity, we can live with the consequences. However, if those consequences are not properly thought through, there will be a disproportionate impact on too many people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will be aware that we normally suspend at 12.30 pm, which is when the Business Committee meets. However, there are a substantial number of questions remaining, so we will continue. I ask Members and the Minister to keep focused. We will continue the one hour of questions to the Minister.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement, which was very thoughtful and robust in the defence of people here. I wish the Minister well in his discussions with the Minister for Work and Pensions, his Ministers of State and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State. However, is there not a danger that, although they may be well-intentioned, or at least Iain Duncan Smith may be well-intentioned, the more ideologically minded Ministers at the Treasury will interfere with any flexibility that Iain Duncan Smith might wish to give to Northern Ireland? I wish the Minister well in his discussions, but I would like him to comment on that.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I have been particular in acknowledging that there are those in the Government who have better intentions when it comes to welfare reform. However, the Member is right on the issue of flexibility and on the issue of management of benefits generally. Too often, Treasury interests prevail, and Treasury interests are to cut money and to be dogmatic about the issue of benefit and welfare generally. Therefore, I completely agree.

As I said in my statement, the London Government ultimately have a fundamental choice to make. They say that they acknowledge the high levels of deprivation, compounded by a legacy of conflict and the potential for instability. If one accepts that those are the circumstances in Northern Ireland and that the same circumstances do not exist in Britain, even though there are areas in Britain that have equivalent deprivation levels to those in Northern Ireland, one has to live with the consequences of accepting that analysis. Iain

Duncan Smith accepts that argument. Indeed, the organisation that he was formerly president of published a report in the late summer making all those arguments.

The consequences should mean that Northern Ireland's particular circumstances are recognised in either financial or operational terms, with regard to how we manage welfare reform, or by conducting welfare reform in the image of our circumstances.

If the London Government do not draw that conclusion, I do not believe that they — I want to be cautious here — are being fair to the people of Northern Ireland. Ultimately, whatever Iain Duncan Smith and the Treasury say, if those circumstances are right, the political leadership of the British Government, the Prime Minister and Nick Clegg, should say that they are right and should act in a way that is consistent with them.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I have a couple of brief questions. The Minister referred to cuts of £500 million. Will he give the House, in round figures, the total number of people on low incomes who will be adversely hit by those cuts? The Minister will be aware that in certain areas, such as my constituency, deprivation often occurs in a number of small pockets. How will he prioritise those areas in his response to the current situation?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I may provide him with more details in a written reply. In my statement, I tried to break down all the changes and cuts to welfare benefits and how they read across to Northern Ireland with regard to the number of people who will be affected. I understand that 7,500 people will be disadvantaged by the impact of the reduction in support for mortgage interest to 3.63%. That is 7,500 out of 15,000 people who receive that support. The Department is trying to fine-tune that figure to make it more precise, but, as I understand it, it is around 7,500.

Just over 1,000 people will be affected by the change to baby tax credit; 1,068 people, I believe. Statistics show that 454 households will be affected by local housing allowance monetary caps. Around 7,200 households will be affected by the removal of the excess payment of £15. The change to set the rate so that it is consistent with rents in the thirtieth percentile will affect 38,000 people who are in receipt of housing benefit.

Those figures demonstrate the scale of the number of people who will be affected by those changes: it will be measured in tens of thousands. Some people will be affected by single changes; others by multiple changes. Tens of thousands of people will be affected. That figure relates to people who are in receipt of benefits, such as housing benefit. All of that will be compounded by growth in the number of people who are unemployed, which, unfortunately, could also be measured in tens of thousands.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I apologise to the Minister for not being in the Chamber for the entire duration of his statement. He was, probably, both correct and incorrect in his comments about escape. I have thought about escaping from other places. I have also thought about escaping from the Chamber, so that I could get out to my constituency to attend to what, at times, I have thought to be more valuable work.

I want to ask the Minister about a part of his statement that I heard. I am interested in research that his Department is conducting in order to deal with the consequences of the coming changes. As part of that work, will the Minister consider taking on board our experience in the regeneration plan for the city of Derry? We discovered that data is not being collected on a section 75 basis by the Department for Social Development and by other Departments. Minister, your Department is not the only Department not to do so. I am conscious of the fact that you and your predecessor inherited the situation, so please do not think that I am in any way saying that the situation is of your making or doing. Section 75 data is collected in your Department, but it is not collated in a way that is categorised. I think that collecting and collating such data would enable you, for instance, to inform us further about the 38,000 people who you said would be affected by housing benefit. Who are they? Are they disabled? Where do they live? We cannot get access to that information.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member get to her question, please?

Ms M Anderson: Will the Minister look at his Department to see what is being done about the collection and collation of section 75 data, so as to enable us to target proposals in a more robust way? I have asked other Ministers to do likewise.

The Minister for Social Development: There is a need for immediate short-term research and assessments on the profile of all that London is proposing and on what the immediate and medium-term impacts will be on the people of Northern Ireland. We need to bear down on that piece of work to know precisely the number of people who are at risk and the financial consequences for each of them, and how the proposals, however well-intentioned by London, might be having some detrimental and prejudicial impact on people and families in Northern Ireland.

Professor Harrington will do some important work, and Queen's University has been commissioned to do some as well. I am also seeking advice from the people I named earlier, particularly Professor Eileen Evason. We need to have the information and evidence base in order to plan how to mitigate the impacts. It will enable me, among other things, to go to my Executive colleagues to present a remedies paper and a suggested platform that are not airy-fairy or made up on my way into the office. It is important that plans are evidence-based and will target those most in need.

In that regard, I sat with staff yesterday and instructed them to scope, for instance, the potential for focusing benefit take-up campaigns on particular groups. That would be done on a without-prejudice basis, because no decision has been taken on this. Therefore, if 7,500 people will be adversely affected by the change in mortgage interest support, will we know who they are? Could we target them in a potential benefit take-up campaign to maximise their access to benefits as part of a mortgage intervention approach to deal with issues of need?

I listened carefully to what the Member said about the collection and non-collation of section 75 data. I will look at that to see whether there is something in it that we could reasonably extract that could, usefully, help that research and evidence base.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. He made an interesting point in his response to Martina Anderson. He said that if the Department has the data, it would almost approach the people, rather than the other way round, in which people have to apply for benefits on an individual basis. This is a different way of doing things. Is the Minister minded to look at how benefits are taken up and in having that

type of one-stop shop approach? Throughout his statement, the Minister commented on DEL and on advice services. How will advice services be protected in any Budget review? Will welfare reform be part of the ongoing discussions with the Budget review team, and with the DEL Minister, in particular?

The Minister for Social Development: Benefit take-up has always been important, but it will become crucial. To some degree, London recognises that there is a higher level of benefit take-up in Northern Ireland. One reason for that is that there have been a number of benefit take-up interventions by the Social Security Agency and other organisations, including some interventions on a targeted basis, to enable people to maximise their benefits. Therefore our benefit take-up profile is in part influenced by the fact that we have benefit take-up campaigns.

12.45 pm

The work of Advice Northern Ireland, Citizens Advice and the Law Centre — all of which are funded by DSD — and the other work undertaken by the SSA on benefit take-up is very important. I brought those organisations in for a meeting about five weeks ago and had a conversation with them about the continued and potentially critical role that they will play. I will not make commitments about what funding might be available for the advice network in Northern Ireland ahead of the conclusions of the Budget discussions, but I told them that day, and I do not mind sharing it with Members, that the funding of advice services is part of the intervention to protect people in need.

As I told Ms Anderson, reworking and developing benefit take-up campaigns to visit those in particular stress — potentially, for example, those in mortgage stress, not least because of mortgage interest support changes — will be a crucial aspect of Government policy over the next four or five years.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the complex and technical changes that he outlined, particularly to disability allowance and incapacity benefit, amount to an ideological assault on vulnerable disabled people?

The Minister for Social Development: There are streams of ideological thinking in what the Treasury in particular has done and in some of the comments, both public and private, that I

have heard from British Government Ministers. I agree that there is an ideological hand in much of what is happening, and although some are acting from the best intentions, as they see it, I believe that they will have some of the worst outcomes. However, when British Government Ministers and people in the Tory Party are saying that getting people out the door for a four-week training programme is the way to help them back into work, I think we are seeing the shadow of Tebbit rather than the influence of those who are best intentioned.

When that issue broke in the media, a local programme covered it extensively. Seamus McAleavey from NICVA said that, in Northern Ireland, getting people out to work for four weeks when there is already a deep volunteering tradition seems to be in tension with local circumstances. Professor Eileen Evason added:

"The problem with the whole exercise is that it is a waste of time, but, as everybody knows, there isn't the work out there."

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.48 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Tourism (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to move the Consideration Stage of the Tourism (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the six clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question on the schedule and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Tourism (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Weir: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill [NIA 3/10] be agreed.

I am pleased to present the Bill on behalf of the Assembly Commission. Financial support for Members of the Assembly and for Members of other legislatures has been the focus of increased public and media scrutiny in recent years. A high level of criticism has been levelled at the lack of independence in the process for determining Members' salaries, allowances and pensions. By bringing forward this Bill, the Assembly seeks to establish a wholly independent process for the determination of future financial support requirements for MLAs.

The Bill is in two parts, so it is effectively two Bills cobbled together. Part 1 will establish the independent financial review panel, and Part 2 will establish the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. I will present the general principles of Part 1, and the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, Mr Declan O'Loan, will discuss the general principles of Part 2.

I begin with an outline to the background of Part 1. The argument has been made that Members in the first mandate should have grasped a lot of the issues in question, so it may be said that we are coming to this matter later than we should have. Nevertheless, I will set out the background to where we have reached.

On 4 May 2007, prior to the restoration of devolution, the Secretary of State wrote to the chairman of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) seeking its agreement to conduct a review of the existing structures for salaries, expenditure and pensions benefits payable to Members and office holders of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The SSRB completed its report in November 2008 and recommended that the Northern Ireland Assembly should commit to accepting the outcome of future independent reviews of salaries, allowances and pensions without modification, thereby respecting the impartiality of the external review

process. That reflected Members' desire to be distanced from deciding their own salaries and financial support arrangements. Indeed, in joint meetings between the Assembly Commission and party leaders, there was consensus that a move to establish an independent body in line with other legislatures would be a positive step towards greater openness and transparency in this area.

After considering the SSRB report, the Assembly Commission supported the recommendation that consideration should be given to the establishment of an independent mechanism for the future determination of salaries, pensions and financial support for Members. To take that forward, the Assembly Commission recommended that an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 should be made to enable the Northern Ireland Assembly to delegate, in its entirety, the function of determining salaries, pensions and financial support to an independent statutory body. The legal framework for determining and paying salaries, allowances, pensions and gratuities is governed by sections 47 and 48 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Section 48 allows for provision for the payment of pensions, gratuities and allowances to former Members or office holders to be delegated by the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, until recently, section 47, which governs the determination and payment of Members' salaries and allowances, explicitly prevented the Assembly from delegating the function of making a determination.

The Northern Ireland Assembly Members Act 2010, which received Royal Assent on 8 April 2010, amended sections 47 and 48 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and allows the Assembly to continue to determine salaries and allowances of Members or to delegate that function to an independent body. The Assembly Commission recommended in its 'Report on the Financial Support and Pensions for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly', dated 22 June 2010, that a Bill should be brought forward to establish an independent statutory body. The Bill proposes the establishment of such a body, namely the independent financial review panel.

The Assembly Commission launched a public consultation on 1 June 2010, inviting comments on the establishment of an independent body and on the functions, objectives, governance

and budget arrangements of that body. The Commission also conducted an equality screening exercise on the proposal, and that exercise did not reveal any significant differential impact on any of the groups set out in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Members may be aware that a similar independent body, the National Assembly for Wales Remuneration Board, has been established in Wales by the National Assembly for Wales (Remuneration) Measure 2010. England has the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), which was established by the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009. Although we are taking this action today, others may be a little bit ahead of us, but the time frame has been relatively similar.

I will explain the general principles of Part 1 of the Bill. The Bill will establish the independent financial review panel, known as the panel. It will consist of a chairperson and two other members, and it will have the power to determine all aspects of financial support to Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. That means that the panel will determine the salaries and allowances payable to Members of the Assembly under section 47 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the pensions, gratuities and allowances payable to former Members and office holders under section 48 of that Act. The Assembly Commission will retain the administration of salaries and expenditure.

The panel will be required to exercise its functions with a view to achieving a proper balance between the objective of ensuring probity, accountability and value for money in the expenditure of public funds and the objective of securing an adequate level of remuneration for Members that allows them to discharge their functions effectively. The general rule will be that a determination will be made by the panel only once in the lifetime of each Assembly. Further determinations may be made as necessary to take account of changes in the law and practice relating to pensions or exceptional circumstances. Unless there are such changes or circumstances, there will not be a determination where there is less than a year between an ordinary general Assembly election and an extraordinary Assembly election.

The panel will be required, so far as is reasonably practical, to make its determination before the election of the Assembly to which the

determination relates, although a determination will survive until a new one is made to replace it. That will allow candidates and, perhaps more importantly, the electorate to know in advance of an election what financial support will be available to an elected candidate. The panel must communicate the determination to the Assembly Commission as soon as is reasonably practical after it has been made, and the Commission must publish the determination in full. It is important to realise that the Commission cannot amend the determination.

To ensure the independence of the panel, the Bill provides that the panel will not be subject to the direction or control of the Northern Ireland Assembly when exercising its functions. The Assembly Commission will be responsible for the appointment of panel members, but Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly will not be members of the appointment panel. In addition, to ensure that the panel is independent of Members, a broad range of connections to the Assembly or individual Members will result in disqualification. I suspect that Members will want to scrutinise that closely in Committee to ensure that the balance is right.

To ensure that the panel operates as cost-effectively as possible, schedule 2 to the Bill states that the Assembly Commission must:

“provide the Panel, or ensure that the Panel is provided, with such administrative support, including staff, services and accommodation, as the Panel may reasonably require to enable it to discharge its functions.”

The Assembly Commission, however, is obliged to consult the panel about such support in order to ensure that such provision, particularly the duties of the staff of the Assembly and the separation of the panel's work from the business of the Northern Ireland Assembly or the Commission, does not call into question the panel's independence.

I look forward to other Members' contributions to the debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (Mr O'Loan): I will speak as the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, but, before doing so, speaking on behalf of my party, I give full support to Part 1 of the Bill and its creation of an independent financial review panel.

Peter Weir has just explained, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, the principles behind the creation of an independent panel in Part 1. As Chairman of the Committee, I will explain the principles behind the creation of an independent Commissioner for Standards, which is provided for in Part 2.

All of us in the House should share the vision of building an Assembly that strengthens democracy and engages the people of Northern Ireland in creating a better future for all. It is vital to the proper functioning of our democracy that there be public confidence in the integrity of us as Members and in the Assembly as an institution. That does not mean that the public should always agree with everything that all of us say or do. That is just not how democracies work. In a Chamber such as this, in which all sections of society have a voice, there will inevitably be differences of opinion. There are opposing views, conflicting priorities and competing ideologies. Sometimes we can agree issues very easily, but sometimes we need robust and challenging debate, and compromises need to be made to allow us to take difficult decisions and reach agreement. We should recognise that the reality of the process does not always inspire public acclaim.

What is more important, however, is that when we propose policies, scrutinise Departments, question Ministers, debate among ourselves and take decisions, it is understood and accepted by the public that we do so solely and exclusively to serve the public interest, not personal or private interests. It would be completely unacceptable — indeed, it would damage the very fabric of our democracy — if Members were to use the Assembly to pursue outside interests. That is why we have such strict rules on Members' interests.

The Assembly's code of conduct provides a transparent system to ensure that Members place the public interest ahead of their private interests. The code of conduct maintains the integrity of the Assembly by requiring Members to adhere to high ethical standards. It enshrines the seven principles of public life at the heart of what we do and sets out clearly the rules that we must follow. In doing so, it upholds public confidence. Of course, that confidence would soon be undermined if Members were not accountable for their conduct under the code. That is where having a powerful and independent Commissioner for Standards comes in. Where

there are allegations that a Member may have breached the code of conduct, they must be investigated and the outcome of that investigation must be made known.

The Assembly has had, for a number of years, an interim arrangement to ensure that any such allegations would be independently investigated. A previous Committee on Standards and Privileges concluded that the office of the Assembly Ombudsman was well placed and equipped to discharge the functions of the commissioner on an interim basis. It is appropriate that, as we debate the Bill's principles today, we should acknowledge and recognise the work that the Ombudsman has done as the Interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Tom Frawley and his assistant, John MacQuarrie, have been the Committee's dedicated servants. They have had to investigate and consider many thorny issues. It is right, therefore, that the public record reflects the Assembly's gratitude for their ongoing service.

2.15 pm

It is high time that the Assembly put in place formal arrangements for its Commissioner for Standards. Therefore, in June, the Assembly debated the Committee's report on enforcing the code of conduct and appointing an Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The report followed an extensive inquiry by the Committee, the aim of which was to establish the most appropriate means of maintaining the Assembly's code of conduct and handling alleged breaches of it. In its report, the Committee concluded, and the Assembly agreed, that, broadly speaking, the principles of the existing system, whereby the Assembly regulates its own affairs and takes decisions on complaints against Members, were appropriate, reasonable and workable. However, it was also recognised that, although those principles were sound, important work could and should be done to ensure that, in practice, the system is more robust and is seen to be fairer and more transparent. Most significantly, it was agreed that the Assembly should have its own statutory Commissioner for Standards.

As in the interim arrangements, the commissioner's role will be to carry out independent investigations into complaints against Members and to present his or her findings to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. However, it was agreed that, in support of that

role, the commissioner's powers should be set out in statute. What is more, it was agreed that the commissioner's independence from the Assembly in respect of specific investigations should be set out in legislation. The Assembly agreed. It also agreed that, for a one-off term of appointment, there should be a fair and open competition for the position of Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Part 2 makes provision for a Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The Bill provides for the commissioner to receive and investigate complaints and other issues concerning Members, to initiate investigations and to report outcomes to the Assembly. It is particularly important that the commissioner be able to initiate investigations when he or she believes that the code of conduct may have been breached but when no complaint has been made. Sir Christopher Kelly, from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, pointed out that it is difficult for the public to have confidence in a commissioner who cannot respond to serious allegations because no complaint has been made. There was no clearer example of that than during the expenses scandal at Westminster, when evident abuses were identified but the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards was powerless to act without a formal complaint. The Assembly is the first legislature in these islands to agree that a commissioner should be able to initiate investigations, and I am pleased to note that, having had time to consider our report on the matter, the House of Commons Committee on Standards and Privileges has come to the same conclusion.

The Bill also provides for the commissioner's independence and freedom from the direction and control of the Assembly. It is important to recall what the Assembly agreed about the commissioner's independence. It is not the case that the Committee on Standards and Privileges should have no role in how the commissioner carries out his or her functions. For example, the Committee should be able to agree the protocols and procedures that the commissioner should apply generally to all cases. To an extent, those protocols are already set out in the Assembly's code of conduct, and it is right that the commissioner should take a consistent approach to considering admissibility and carrying out investigations. It is also appropriate that, having received a report from the commissioner on a specific complaint, the Committee should be able to ask the

commissioner to go back and establish or clarify particular points.

When we talk about the commissioner's independence, we mean that, subject to any general admissibility criteria, the commissioner must be free to carry out an investigation into a Member if the commissioner believes that an investigation is appropriate. Furthermore, once the commissioner has decided to carry out a specific investigation, he or she must be able to carry it out as he or she sees fit within the agreed framework. Most importantly of all, the commissioner must be free to reach and express any particular conclusions on the outcome of any investigation.

The Assembly has agreed that, in support of those important principles and to promote transparency, the Committee on Standards and Privileges will always publish in full any reports of the commissioner in its own reports to the Assembly. In that way, the commissioner's independence will be safeguarded, and his or her findings will always be a matter of public record. I am pleased that the Bill provides for each of those principles, and, in doing so, it upholds the commissioner's independence.

The Bill also gives the commissioner important powers. Most significantly, the commissioner will have the independent power to call for witnesses and documents. The Bill also creates a number of offences that relate to refusals to provide, or otherwise failing, to give evidence in accordance with a request by the commissioner. Those provisions will give the commissioner the ability to establish the full facts during any investigation.

I am pleased that the Assembly Commission has indicated that it will provide the necessary resources for the commissioner. Of course, at this time, we are more mindful than ever of the need to use our resources prudently. We should, therefore, be clear that Part 2 of the Bill is not about creating a whole new office with significant running costs. It is about putting in place improved arrangements and greater powers for a function that is already carried out and funded by the public purse. The predicted annual running costs of the new commissioner are estimated to be up to £25,000, but they may well be less. That amount is broadly comparable with the cost of the current arrangements. I hope that we can all agree that that is a small amount to pay to

ensure the open and transparent accountability of Members.

Part 2 of the Bill provides a legislative framework that will strengthen the public's trust in the integrity of the Assembly. It has been agreed unanimously by the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and it signifies how seriously the Assembly takes the issue of the conduct of its Members. I welcome the provisions of the Bill and commend them to the House.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak about Part 2 of the Bill. There is a consensus in the Committee on Standards and Privileges and in the Assembly that we, as public representatives, must be able to show leadership and demonstrate that we are capable of taking responsibility for having an effective means of holding one another to account.

For a number of years, the Assembly has had in place an interim arrangement to ensure that any such allegations would be independently investigated. I thank the Interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards, Mr Tom Frawley, and Mr John MacQuarrie. For a number of years, they assisted the Committee with what can appear, at times, to be a thankless task. Let me assure them that the Committee, as the Chairperson said, is grateful for their diligence and professionalism.

The Assembly discussed the policy proposals in relation to the post of Assembly Commissioner for Standards when it debated the Committee's report last June. That report followed a wide-ranging Committee inquiry, the aim of which was to establish the most suitable way of maintaining the Assembly's code of conduct and handling alleged breaches of it. We all want to strengthen our democracy, and it is imperative to our democracy that there is public confidence in our honesty as Members and in the Assembly as an institution. The Bill will help us to repair the enormous damage to the credibility of politicians that occurred following the Westminster scandals. Politicians' names were mud after what went on there, and there was a perception among the general public that every politician was on the gravy train. I want to put on record that I believe that every Member of the Assembly works for the benefit of all the people.

We must obtain the public's trust again, and our new code of conduct endeavours to do that. As we are talking about standards in

public life, it is right and appropriate that the commissioner should be appointed by means of an open and transparent competition that is consistent with the principles of best practice. That is set out very well in schedule 3 to the Bill, which contains a lengthy list of persons who are disqualified from being appointed, or from serving, as the commissioner. The Bill team and the Committee did a lot of work on that important aspect of the Bill.

It is very important that the commissioner will be able to initiate investigations where he or she believes that a breach of the code of conduct may have occurred but where no complaint has been made. There is no clearer example of that, as has already been mentioned, than during the expenses scandal at Westminster. There was no mechanism in place for the commissioner to conduct an investigation. Everybody knew that a significant number of MPs were engaging in serious wrongdoings, and, basically, the system failed the taxpayer. I am glad that Westminster is following the Assembly's lead.

The Bill also provides for the commissioner's independence and freedom from the direction and control of the Assembly. Furthermore, it gives the commissioner important powers, mainly that the commissioner will have the independent power to call for witnesses and documents in a similar way to the Standards and Privileges Committee.

The predicted annual running costs of £25,000 have been touched upon. That is in line with what is paid to the interim commissioner at present. That provides value for money, and I hope that it allows us to continue the good work in an open, transparent and accountable way for elected representatives.

In conclusion, the Bill provides a parliamentary structure that will build up public trust in the honour of the Assembly. It has been endorsed collectively by the Committee on Standards and Privileges and signifies that the Assembly takes its Members' conduct very seriously. I welcome the Bill and commend it to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Rev Dr Bob Coulter. Dr Coulter, if you are still speaking at 2.30 pm, I will have to interrupt to begin Question Time.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The sermon will be short then.

Involvement in public life should, in some sense, be a calling and not simply a paid occupation. That is why I believe that only the highest standards of conduct from public representatives are acceptable, especially in matters of finance, expenses and the conduct of public life. Although some MPs abused the system in Westminster, many public representatives simply operated the system that was in place, largely without question. It is easy to see why that happened. The system was clearly inadequate to ensure the high standards expected by the electorate of their public representatives. That is precisely why a robust system has to be in place. The Bill seeks to ensure that. We must give it our support, because clarity, which the Bill provides, is in the interest of everyone, including Members, the public and those who administer the system.

When he was Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell told his Parliament repeatedly that he had too much power and asked it repeatedly to make him "more bounded than I am". Assembly Members should take note of that sound advice. There is a need to be above suspicion when determining salaries or when adjudicating on the conduct of a Member, and that is why independent bodies are so important to ensure that MLAs demonstrate a willingness to bring themselves under a set of standards and rules of remuneration and a code of conduct that is clear and visible to all.

Transparency has to be the watchword of all public life, all public conduct and all public representatives. The public expects the level of scrutiny and the mechanism to control the controversial issues of pay and conduct that the Bill lays before the House today. To do that job convincingly and adequately, the Standards Commissioner has to have access to the powers that are prescribed in the Bill. How can anyone fear clarity? Why should anyone fear clarity? Let us vote today for clarity, certainty and probity. Let us show the people whom we represent that we mean business. I commend the measures to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should take their ease for a few seconds. At 2.30 pm, we will begin questions to the Minister of Education. We will return to the debate after Question Time, when Mr Peter Weir will make a winding-up speech.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Faith-based Education

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to outline her Department's position in relation to the right of parents to opt for faith-based education for their children. (AQO 574/11)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Is prionsabal lárnach den reachtaíocht oideachais í oideachas a chur ar fáil do dhaltáí de réir mhianta a dtuismitheoirí in gach cás inar féidir.

It is a central principle in education legislation that, where possible, pupils must be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. We have a diversity of school types and sectors in the North of Ireland, each with its own distinctive character. Since coming into office, I have actively supported policies that encourage and support collaboration and integrating between sectors.

The promotion of equality and respect for diversity are long established in education legislation. They are reflected in the rights of churches to establish and own schools and in the duties on my Department to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium and integrated education. Those legislative principles continue to be reflected in the Executive's policy on the review of public administration and in the Education Bill, with the creation of a single education and skills authority (ESA) to support all sectors. I hope that the Bill will return to the Assembly as soon as possible.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her reply. Can she outline the contribution that faith-based education sectors across Northern Ireland make, and can she give a commitment to allow and guarantee parental choice over the sector that parents want their children to attend?

The Minister of Education: The evidence shows that ethos, whether Catholic, controlled, Irish-medium or integrated, is important and that successful schools are those with an ethos that pupils, parents, staff and governors support. That is why my school improvement policy,

Every School a Good School, identifies the importance of having an ethos of aspiration and high expectation for pupils. That makes a real difference, particularly for children from our most disadvantaged areas. As Minister, I want to ensure that we support diversity of provision and the rights of parents in an equality framework and that we have an ethos of collaborating and integrating so that all our young people are working and studying together.

Mr Storey: Given the Minister's commitment to protecting the rights of parents, can she explain whether she is being partial in that she denies the rights of parents who wish to send their child to a grammar school? Were her proposals on ESA damaging to Catholic education in that they would have taken away from Catholic schools the rights that they have long had since they were established? How does she marry those two blatant contradictions, which are only in keeping with her many others?

The Minister of Education: Any choice needs to be based on equality. It is interesting to hear the Member's party's new-found ideas on academic selection. I remind the DUP of one of its sacred cows, and I can hear them shouting across already, because they know that this is the case. The 1989 DUP election manifesto, which is believed to have been written largely by Mr Robinson and was a platform on which Mr Wilson stood, states:

"We believe that selection at 11 should be ended. The 11-plus procedure is educationally unsound and socially divisive and places unnecessary strain upon children at a very early age."

Now, folks, I am being accused of hypocrisy? I rest my case. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sure that, in the lead-up to Christmas, we will want to reflect that in how we treat each other.

Mr B McCrea: I am in the Christmas spirit, but, at the risk of getting the Minister's ire, I am interested in the substance of the issue of choice. If one celebrates diversity, people will be making a choice. What is the Minister's feeling on the issue of choice? Should parents have the right to choose the most appropriate school for their child?

The Minister of Education: Well, to my friend Basil, I believe that I answered the question on choice. However, regardless of what choice parents make and regardless of what schools

we have in our system, I want to ensure that we have academic excellence, vocational excellence and a world-class education system for all our young people. That is the point that I was referring to earlier. We can have a little joke about education, but there is no joke about standards and ensuring that we have a world class education system that everybody gets access to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Ian McCrea.

Mr I McCrea: Question number, um —

Mr Buchanan: Two.

Capital Works: Magherafelt

2. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Education to outline progress on the capital build projects being carried out in the Magherafelt area. (AQO 575/11)

The Minister of Education: Are you sure? An bhfuil tú cinnte? Number 2?

Tugadh breis agus £26 milliún d'infheistíocht chaipitil le foirgnimh nua scoile a sholáthar i gceantar Mhachaire Fíolta do Woods Primary School, do St Pius X High School, do Sperrin Integrated College agus do Spires Integrated Primary School.

Capital investment of over £26 million has been provided for new school buildings in the Magherafelt area, at Woods Primary School, St Pius X High School, Sperrin Integrated College and Spires Integrated Primary School. In addition, the construction of the new school building for Magherafelt High School is under way. Work started in January 2010, and it is estimated that the construction of the new school will be completed in November 2011.

This morning, as the Member will be aware, I submitted a written statement to the Assembly setting out concerns regarding the approvals and procurement of that project. The chief executive of the board has reported that the board has entered into an arrangement with the contractor involved, which has resulted in construction works being undertaken without all the necessary approvals being in place with the Department, and the board has made payments, an element of which has not been approved by the Department. That is a very serious matter, and I have, therefore, ordered an external investigation of all the circumstances

surrounding the procurement and work associated with that contract. I expect to have the investigation report before Christmas, and I will then judge what further steps are needed. I will, of course, update the Assembly in due course. The Audit Office has been kept fully apprised of those developments.

The Member will also be aware that, in June, I secured additional capital funding, which permitted me to announce that 13 new school building projects, including those for Magherafelt Primary School and Magherafelt Nursery School, should commence. Those two newbuilds in Magherafelt are scheduled to start in January 2011.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Sir Reg Empey — sorry, I call Ian McCrea.

Mr I McCrea: There is a bit of confusion in the House today.

The Minister has referred to the number of new school builds in the Magherafelt area and, indeed, the Mid Ulster constituency. She also referred to her statement, and I await the outcome of that investigation with interest, because there are concerns there.

The Minister will not be surprised when I raise the issue of the Rainey Endowed grammar school in Magherafelt, which I believe is probably one of the high priorities within the board area but is outside the board's responsibility.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, Mr McCrea.

Mr I McCrea: Can the Minister assure the House that giving the school in Magherafelt a newbuild is a priority for her Department?

The Minister of Education: The scheme for a proposed new school building for Rainey Endowed is included in my Department's investment delivery plan (IDP). The school is moving to appoint a design team for the project. Following the recent review of capital projects, Rainey Endowed School was deemed fully compliant. At present, there are 53 schemes remaining on the Department's investment delivery plan. Obviously, my ability to move those and other much-needed school building programmes forward is totally dependent on the capital funds given to my Department.

Leanfaidh mé leis an stocaireacht chun cistí caipitil a fháil ionas gur féidir leanúint de chlár tógála na scoileanna.

I will continue to lobby for capital funds to drive forward the school building programme. I very much look forward to the British Government adhering to the agreements made about the strategic investment programme and the investment money that they agreed to allocate to this part of Ireland. Rainey Endowed School will be considered for funding alongside the other projects remaining on the IDP.

Sir Reg Empey: Will the Minister enlighten the House on the progress being made on the capital build project for Strathearn School in east Belfast?

The Minister of Education: Strathearn School is one of the schools that was given priority. I will send the Member an update on that.

Entitlement Framework

3. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of the entitlement framework. (AQO 576/11)

The Minister of Education: Tá cur i bhfeidhm iomlán an chreata teidlíochta faoin bhliain 2013 fós ina phríomh-thosaíocht ag mo Roinn.

The full implementation of the entitlement framework by 2013 remains a key priority for my Department. Although some progress has been made in recent years, the pace of progress needs to be quickened if we are to ensure that all young people, regardless of the sector or geographical area in which they go to school, have equal opportunity to access a broad-based curriculum by 2013. I firmly believe that through offering pupils access to a wide range of courses that meet their interests, aptitudes and career aspirations, we will ensure that many more young people can achieve their full potential.

Although almost all schools are members of area learning communities, I remain to be convinced that they are all actively playing their part, as they should be. There is nothing to fear from engaging with one other. Barriers can be overcome, and issues such as timetabling can be resolved. The area learning community is the forum where issues are brought, discussed and resolved and where good practice is shared on an area basis. In many cases, however, that collaboration is not happening as much it should be across the classes, as opposed to across the various religions.

I want all schools and sectors to work together, because they can deliver so much more for their pupils when they, along with the further education colleges, pool their resources and share experiences and expertise. I want schools to offer pupils a wide range of opportunities through effective collaboration, because that often delivers better education experiences for pupils and better value for money for taxpayers.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister and welcome the frankness of her answer. It confirms what was stated in the recent Together Towards Entitlement report, which was that achieving the entitlement framework across the schools in Northern Ireland is well behind schedule. That ties in with the concept of area-based planning. The Minister outlined that certain sectors are not moving forward with that. Therefore, what can she do and what is she doing to ensure that that schedule will be achieved?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his interest in the area. It is essential that all schools work together. One of the biggest policies that made a big difference to the entitlement framework was the removal of the 11-plus, because schools were in competition with one another rather than collaborating. Thankfully, more and more schools are now working together.

I welcome the fact that a significant number of schools have reached the target of providing 24 or 27 subjects. However, some are still not playing their role. I have said clearly that my Department is monitoring that. For example, we will not continue to fund a couple of courses in art and science for four or five pupils in one town, because we cannot continue to pay for the resources for teachers and pupils for a two-year period when those pupils should be in one class in that area. My Department cannot continue to fund on that basis, and we are telling area learning communities in those towns and villages to get together, provide a broad-based curriculum and not duplicate courses.

Mr Bell: Is it the case that the Minister's Department will have failed to ensure that there are 24 choices at Key Stage 4 and 27 choices at post-16 by September 2013? If so, does she agree that it would be highly regrettable if this were not on target and ready for 2013?

2.45 pm

The Minister of Education: I welcome the progress that has been made. I look forward to support from the Members opposite in bringing about that progress.

Members know about the jigsaw of interconnected reforms that we have: the revised curriculum, which is a good curriculum; the entitlement framework, which is very broad-based; area learning communities, which are working together; and some good models of very good practice. Lisanelly is one example of how we should shape the future of our education system.

All schools have to play their part. My Department is working very closely with schools to do that. I hope that every Member in the House is playing their role with their local schools, because we cannot have a situation in which some schools are refusing to share facilities or to timetable with other schools in their area. Often, that breaks down over class not religion. It is up to everyone to play their role.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister touched on this matter, but I am not very clear about it. What is the Department doing to mainstream good relations and shared education across sectors through the development of the entitlement framework?

The Minister of Education: People may be surprised at the extent of shared education. I have been to schools across the North. Some places are more advanced than others. However, having spoken to parents and young people, I know that more and more pupils are doing one A level in one school, a second A level in another school and a third A level in another school. More and more, as I visit our post-primary schools, I see four or five different uniforms in classrooms, and that is the way that it should be. I am driving integration and collaboration, and I am encouraging and supporting area learning communities. That is the way forward. Schools should not be competing with each other in an area, schools should be working together.

Schools: North Antrim

4. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education which schools she has visited in the North Antrim area since May 2007 and whether she intends to meet the staff and governors of Castle Tower School to discuss the proposed newbuild. (AQO 577/11)

The Minister of Education: Ó mhí Bealtaine 2007, thug mé cuairt ar roinnt scoileanna i gceantar Aontroma Thuaidh le réimse leathan de cheisteanna oideachais a phlé.

Since May 2007, I have visited a number of schools in the north Antrim area, including Bunscoil an Chaistil, Garryduff Primary School, Leaney Primary School, St Colmcille's Primary School, St Mary's Primary School, Ballycastle Integrated Primary School, St Patrick's and St Brigid's Primary School, Cross and Passion College, Our Lady of Lourdes High School and North Coast Integrated College to discuss a wide variety of educational issues. In addition, I have already met representatives from and visited Castle Tower School. Therefore, I am fully aware of the conditions under which the school is operating. However, due to uncertainty over the resources available for future development, it is not possible to provide a time frame on the way forward for such potential projects.

I am always keen to meet schools' representatives to discuss issues directly. However, in this case, having already met representatives and visited the school to discuss all the issues, I do not feel that a meeting would add any benefit at this time.

I want to build schools. I have shown that, when resources are available, I can deliver new schools. Since May 2007, the Department has completed 49 major projects. I have visited two such projects yesterday and today and two others in the past couple of weeks, all of which are in north Antrim. We have spent £422.5 million on our schools estate. Seven further major capital schools projects are on site, which is a further investment of £89.4 million.

The rate at which I can invest in the schools estate is dependent upon the resources made available to me by the Executive. I urge Members of the Assembly and, indeed, the Member from the party opposite to support the case for providing adequate resources to continue with the investment and school building programmes.

Mr Frew: The Minister will know the impossible position that Castle Tower School is in, given that it is one school but three campuses. What used to be three schools has been left in an impossible situation. They were promised a newbuild, hence the name Castle Tower School, as that newbuild was to be situated near the old Ballymena castle. The school has been left

in a serious position. Will the Minister prioritise a newbuild for the school? She can and she must act, as she did on behalf of Whitehouse Primary School, which I commend. Will she act responsibly and immediately on this issue?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his complimentary comments, and I take them in the spirit in which they were made.

Aithníonn mo Roinn go bhfuil saincheisteanna tromchúiseacha cóiríochta ag Castle Tower Special School.

My Department recognises that there are serious accommodation issues at Castle Tower School, and I am particularly conscious that our most vulnerable children are being educated in poor accommodation. I also fully appreciate that the difficulties, particularly operating the school on a spilt-site campus, will be fully alleviated only by the provision of a fit-for-purpose school building. The scheme for Castle Tower School is one of a significant number that the Department supports, but for which the funding has not yet been announced. As the Member will know, Whitehouse Primary School was one of the schools on the list of capital projects.

When the North Eastern Education and Library Board brought forward a revised economic appraisal for the Castle Tower School project in 2008, it was accorded priority status by my Department, and it was reviewed and scrutinised as a matter of urgency. I hope that the Members opposite and all other Members in the House understand the importance of the capital budget being protected and of the British Government adhering to the international agreements to which they are party. I look forward to joining all parties in the House in fighting our corner for more money for capital projects.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer and for her investment in north Antrim to date. In recent weeks, she visited Portglenone and Ballycastle, where new capital build schools have been put in place. I understand the frustration of parents, teachers and pupils from Castle Tower School and from Braidside Integrated School in Ballymena. It is important, therefore, that we get the necessary resources for the capital budget. How many capital building projects have been completed since the Minister took office in May 2007?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I must put on record the wonderful visits that I made to St Mary's in Portglenone and to the new school in Ballycastle.

If anyone wonders whether devolution is working, the answer is yes, and one of the biggest pieces of evidence that I have for that is the capital spend budget. I am sure that other Ministers will talk about their Departments, but I will focus on mine. In the two years prior to my coming into office, direct rule Ministers handed back £62 million and £94 million respectively to the British Exchequer; I have not done that. Since May 2007, the Department has completed 48 major schools and spent £404 million on the schools estate. A further 15 major capital schools projects are on site, representing a further investment of over £250 million. Two additional major capital works at Lagan College and Tor Bank School are being procured, and work has not yet commenced on site.

This morning, I was at a newbuild opening on the lower Falls in Belfast, and I was at St Cecilia's College in Derry yesterday. Indeed, in Derry alone, there have been major investments in St Mary's College, St Cecilia's College and Lisneal College. Two weeks ago, I attended the opening of the Belfast Model School for Girls, which is a wonderful school that does good work and provides high standards.

Mr Storey: You were an hour and a half late.

The Minister of Education: The Member, who is also the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, is very rude. I hope that he is not suggesting that I should have missed my Question Time to attend the opening of that school. We should have more respect for these institutions and for the Assembly. I went to the school immediately after Question Time. We should not have a begrudging approach to this. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education is acting inappropriately. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Lo: The Minister mentioned Lagan College. Will she provide the House with an update on the progress that has been made on the project at that school?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for her question. As she will know, I have visited Lagan College, and it does good work. The project is in the process of being procured, and

it is one of the two school projects that will go forward next.

Schools: Lisanelly Site

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education what level of commitment she has received from the schools in Omagh to move to the proposed shared educational campus on the former military base at Lisanelly. (AQO 578/11)

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for bringing this matter to the House, because it is one that is close to my heart and in which I have an active interest. Indeed, I established and chaired the related working group.

Ní dóigh liom gur féidir feidhm níos fearr a bhaint as iar-bhunáit de chuid arm na Breataine ná í a bheith ag cur le soláthar oideachais.

There could not be a more laudable use of a former British Army base than to enhance education provision. The Lisanelly project offers a unique opportunity to provide the young people of Omagh with access to a broad and balanced curriculum in state-of-the-art accommodation. The co-location of a number of Omagh schools, including Arvalee Special School, on a single campus will enable schools to share expertise, reduce duplication and provide courses that are sustainable in the longer term. The project will benefit not only the young people enrolled in schools on the campus but pupils from other schools in the Omagh area. It represents a unique opportunity on this island to deliver the integration of education.

This exciting project is in the early stages of development, but, even now, it captures the imagination of all involved. I pay tribute to Rev Robert Herron and Monsignor Joseph Donnelly, co-chairpersons of the Lisanelly shared educational campus steering group, for the leadership that they have provided in getting the project to this stage. I am also encouraged by the support of other stakeholders in the area, including Omagh District Council. The design team, which was appointed in March 2010 and which works with schools in the area, has produced preliminary concept plans and indicative designs of the site layout. For those involved, the process of developing those early plans has increased understanding of what the project is about and hopes to achieve and has highlighted how the shared campus could

change the way in which future education is delivered for the young people of Omagh.

I have seen the outline master plan, and I am more convinced than ever that this is a truly remarkable opportunity. Pupils, parents, teachers, principals, school governors and, indeed, the people of Omagh will be excited about the possibilities that the campus offers. The detail will be available for all to see following the launch of a consultation later this week, and I look forward to going to Omagh to be with the people involved. Following that consultation, the next phase will be to move to more detailed planning. I envisage that, at that stage, all schools in the Omagh area will be able to avail themselves of the facilities and will be actively involved in the project.

Mr Buchanan: I listened carefully to what the Minister said, and I have no doubt that she is out of touch with the people of Omagh. The Minister will be aware that the business case is for six schools to come on to the campus. Given that only three schools are committed to the campus, does the Minister really think that it is a viable project? Does she think that, as Minister, she can bully the other schools to come on to the site by starving them of future funding in the most discriminatory manner?

The Minister of Education: I absolutely reject those comments and the tone in which they were made. I have met the people of Omagh. I have met Danny McSorley, who represents the district council. I have met the Catholic trustees and the co-chairpersons of the project. I have seen the leadership that schools in all sectors demonstrate. The point needs to be made that this is a dynamic project. It is a project through which we have a unique opportunity to build a most amazing educational campus on a former British military site in the heart of Omagh.

The outline business case will have to show value for money, regardless of the number of schools that move to the Lisanelly site. Equally, any school that would like a newbuild will have to include Lisanelly as part of a business case. That is the way in which it works here. I refute the Member's bullying claim. Indeed, I am very disappointed by that comment. Omagh is very lucky to be getting this project, and the people of Omagh understand that.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why it is important that the project progresses, given the

financial constraints now and the possibility of future financial constraints?

The Minister of Education: In the current financial climate, there is a need to focus on, and to address, the issue of sustainable schools, a need for shared planning of capital provision and a need to make optimum use of scarce financial resources.

Unlike previous Ministers, I am not going to build schools that will be empty in a couple of years' time. That would not be a good use of public money.

3.00 pm

School capital provision can no longer be taken in isolation; it must be taken in the context of the overall needs of an area. It is, therefore, important for Omagh to seize the opportunity, as such sites rarely become available. That is particularly true of a site of such magnitude, which has the potential to provide for a shared educational campus. This is not even just about educational issues; it is about the regeneration of a town — the town of Omagh. The project will have benefits for every sector of the community, which is why all sectors are supporting it.

Tá tairbhí oideachais, sóisialta agus eacnamaíochta le baint amach tríd níos mó comhroinnt san oideachas. There are educational, social and economic benefits to be realised through greater sharing in education. This unique project offers the opportunity for a number of schools to co-locate on the Lisanelly site and to explore and plan the campus to include shared facilities that will allow all the young people in Omagh to have access to state-of-the-art facilities that offer a broad and balanced curriculum.

We will have all types of schools on the campus, and that will allow all the pupils to interact with one another. I am particularly pleased that Arvalee School and Resource Centre will be on the campus, because it has much expertise to offer other schools.

Mr Buchanan's comments about the Lisanelly site do not sit very well with his party leader's support for the integrating of education. It would be interesting to know what that party's policy is on the issue. Is it the case that it is for selection and against selection and that it is riding two horses?

Employment and Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn.

Student Fees

1. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether, since taking up office, he has had any discussions with Joanne Stuart or the students' unions on the proposed increase in student fees. (AQO 589/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning

(Mr Kennedy): On the same day that a public petition on student fees was presented to the Assembly, I was grateful that, at my request, representatives from the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the presidents of the student unions at Queen's, the University of Ulster and St Mary's University College were able to meet with me. That gave me an early opportunity to hear their views and concerns, and I gave them my assurance that, because I recognise and value the contribution that they have to make, they will remain fully involved in the process.

Indeed, my Department recently reconstituted a key stakeholder group for the development of future student finance policy, and the first of a series of meetings over the coming months is taking place this afternoon. The NUS/USI will be key members of that stakeholder group.

I spoke with Joanne Stuart and subsequently met her on 17 November to discuss the updating of her report in light of the publication of the Browne review, the UK Government's response to that review and the new context in which the higher education debate is taking place following the announcement of the details of the comprehensive spending review.

I assure the House that I share the concerns both of Members and Executive colleagues on how the future fees and student finance policy will be impacted on by the impending budget reductions across Departments. Therefore, I underline again the urgent need for all those involved and with an interest to commit to a responsible, mature and democratic debate on the issue of higher education funding and fees.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Minister for his response. I thank him especially for his continued engagement with the students and with Joanne Stuart. Given that Joanne Stuart's

review was commissioned in 2008, that it commenced in 2009 and that we received the report a couple of months ago in 2010, does the Minister have any sense of the time frame for the completion of the update? This is a matter of urgency. It is my belief that some young people and their families will suffer if the matter is not sorted out fairly soon.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I thank the Member for her supplementary question.

As the Member and the House will know, the Stuart report was commissioned by my predecessor and pre-dated the Browne review at UK level. Therefore, it would have made no sense to publish Stuart without knowing the outcome of the Browne report.

Joanne Stuart's report made a number of recommendations and was submitted to my predecessor in March this year. However, the economic climate was changing quickly, and Joanne Stuart's report expressly indicated that it would need to be reviewed in the light of Lord Browne's report. Therefore although it was appropriate to publish the Stuart report at the same time as the Browne report to enable a fully informed public debate to begin, it is also very important that Joanne Stuart be given the opportunity to update her report.

That is being done in the light of the Browne report, the Government's response to it, and the comprehensive spending review. I am pleased to say that we expect Joanne Stuart to report to me by the end of this year so that I can assess matters and make recommendations to the Executive and, ultimately, to the House.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister confirm that it is his belief that access to university education should be based simply on ability to learn and not on ability to pay? Will he send a message to parents and concerned students that there will be no material increase in fees in Northern Irish universities in the foreseeable future?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for his question. As the newly appointed Minister, I have made it clear that my view and guiding principle is that places at university should be based on ability to learn and not on ability to pay.

We are in a difficult economic climate. I will certainly not make the mistake of prejudging the

outcome of Joanne Stuart's deliberations or the ongoing Budget negotiations. It is important that those Budget negotiations be concluded and that we form a Budget so that there is clarity and certainty about the future of the matter.

I have to caution the Member that it is, perhaps, a mistake to make promises that may be difficult to keep in the current economic climate. I am not interested in that. I need to see the detail of Joanne Stuart's report to me, and I need to be aware of the financial implications of the comprehensive spending review settlement for my Department.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that the debate in Northern Ireland avoids the disgraceful scenes of violence recently witnessed at a student protest in London?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I thank the Member for his question. I strongly agree with his sentiments and utterly condemn the despicable scenes of violence witnessed at the student protest in London. The democratic right to protest carries the responsibility to do so in a peaceful and law-abiding fashion. Instead, in our nation's capital, police officers were injured, the property of a democratic political party was attacked, and our nation's capital was scarred by mob violence.

I am pleased that the local NUS leadership saw fit to condemn that thuggery. There is a weighty responsibility on the student leadership, nationally and locally, to ensure that all protests are peaceful. Inflammatory language can have no part in the debate on university funding. That underlines the urgent need for everyone to commit to a responsible, mature and democratic debate on higher-education funding and fees.

Universities: Research and Development

2. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether continued investment in research and development in universities is essential to secure future economic growth. (AQO 590/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Investment in research and development is absolutely vital for securing economic growth. It is the engine of innovation, and it is innovation that drives growth and economic development.

Therefore, it is essential that the Executive continue to give a high priority to investing in our universities' research and development programmes. That is especially important in Northern Ireland, where research undertaken by universities plays a significant role in the economy compared with the rest of the United Kingdom.

In Northern Ireland, universities account for nearly half of research and development expenditure, which is around twice the UK average. That is mainly due to the high number of small to medium-sized firms, which, historically, are unable to fund research projects. That, in turn, places a greater responsibility on the Government here to ensure that the higher education sector is properly resourced to undertake high-quality research, so that the economic benefits of such investment are available to the wider population of Northern Ireland.

At the recent US/Northern Ireland investment conference in Washington, existing investors from the USA commented that the high quality of the research and development work at Northern Ireland universities, the skills of the workforce, and the relationship between business, academia and Government were the main reasons for locating their operations in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is essential that our current levels of investment are maintained, if not increased, in the forthcoming Budget.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he think that the present level of investment in research and development can be sustained in the absence of the innovation fund?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. My Department and I are committed to continuing to support the further education sector in carrying out its research and development activities to support the needs of businesses, particularly its work in emerging and specialised areas such as wind technology, engineering, information and communication technology, and electronics, which will contribute to the growth of our economy. Further education sector research and development initiatives include the South West College's InnoTech centre, which is working with a range of local small and medium-sized enterprises to assist them in developing new ideas and products and bringing them to market. Carbon Zero Northern Ireland is a further education sector-wide project which is carrying out research and development in the specific area of sustainability. Those

two initiatives have been funded through my Department's innovation fund, which is a time-limited programme and is due to conclude in March 2011. We have bid for resources to sustain those and other good projects. If they are not funded, it will be very difficult to continue with that work.

Mr Bell: Many Members will welcome your commitment to research and development in our universities. Can you assure us that the twin pillars of investment in quality education and the success that we have in Northern Ireland in placing more working-class children in university than any other part of the United Kingdom will continue to go forward together?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for his contribution, and I entirely agree. The secret to finding a successful resolution to our economic problems lies in encouraging and developing research and development, as well as training and skills. That surely has to be the guiding principle of the Executive: that even in straitened economic times we can find our way through this and give hope, particularly to our young people.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister inform us of any consideration that he has given, or intends to give, to encouraging further co-operation in research and development between universities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I will take this opportunity to welcome the new Member to Question Time and to thank him for his question. Co-operation is always dependent on a good working relationship between universities across not only Northern Ireland but the Republic of Ireland.

If there are sensible initiatives, for which funding is available — and I suspect that funding will be the key issue, not only for Northern Ireland but for the Republic of Ireland, given its particular economic problems — my officials and the universities will be keen to explore mutually beneficial opportunities.

3.15 pm

Further and Higher Education: Working-class Protestants

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what

funding or programmes are provided by his Department to promote further and higher education in working-class Protestant areas and for his assessment of the level of success achieved to date. (AQO 591/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Raising education attainment at post-primary level is critical to ensuring the widest pool of applicants to further and higher education. Although that is most properly a matter for schools and for the Department and Minister of Education, higher education institutions can play a role.

In the academic year 2010-11, my Department allocated more than £2.2 million to promote widening participation in higher education. That figure includes £700,000 funding for special projects, such as the Step-Up and Discovering Queen's programmes, to support work to raise aspirations and education attainment in schools in working-class areas. Much of that special project work is undertaken in schools in working-class Protestant areas with traditionally low levels of progression in education. In addition, my Department will provide £1.5 million in widening-participation premium funding to support recruitment and retention of students from less-advantaged backgrounds.

In 2000-01, almost 5,000 enrolments in courses at local further and higher education institutions were from students from the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland who declared their community background as Protestant. By 2008-09, that figure had risen to nearly 7,000, which is an increase of around two fifths. Those trends are encouraging. However, stubborn pockets remain, including those in working-class Protestant areas where participation is not as high as it should be.

Therefore, I am not complacent: my Department currently leads the development of a regional widening-participation strategy that aims to further improve the progression rates of all under-represented groups. That demonstrates my Department's continuing commitment to that important issue.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am not sure whether he is aware of the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre in North Down, which offers programmes to working-class Protestant women and is now branching out to provide programmes to men. The centre is funded by Peace III, the Department for Social

Development and the Irish Government. Will the Minister make a commitment to the House that he will visit the centre to see the excellent work that it provides to working-class Protestant communities, and that he will look at funding that he can arrange to help them to progress their educational status.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I am grateful to the Member for his question. Obviously, an invitation from the group would be considered carefully. I would like to see whether I could pay a visit to observe the important work that is being done and to see whether progress could be made on that. I am aware that, apart from the Member, other local representatives made representations to my predecessor on the issue. I hope that, perhaps, a visit could be arranged at the earliest opportunity in order to explore possibilities.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his commitment to all under-represented groups, not just to those from one section of the community.

One problem that was highlighted during the Committee's NEETs (not in education, employment or training) inquiry is the difficulty, with regard to data collection and tracking, in following a student after he or she has left school at 16 years of age. Has the Minister had any more success with the Minister of Education to bring about good co-operation between the two Departments on following students and on provision of good careers advice? It is my understanding that, at present, some schools can refuse to take up your Department's careers advice, which is critical if young people are to select the right further and higher education courses.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question, and I pay tribute to her work as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and thank her for that. I accept entirely her point that co-operation and collaboration would be and will be the sensible way forward. Departmental officials and I will be seeking to achieve progress on ensuring that we can make a difference to the lives of young people who, unless we can deal with this issue in a comprehensive manner, will continue to face a very uncertain future.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers, not only to this question but to

the previous questions. It is useful that more people outside of the Committee know about the widening participation scheme. In one of his earlier answers, the Minister talked about the ability to learn versus the ability to pay. If you go for the ability to pay, does the Minister have any idea of what the impact would be on working-class communities if an increase in student fees were imposed on students?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I thank the Member for her comments and for her supplementary question. I am loath at this stage to get into a discussion on figures, except to say that I have already stated that the allocation of university places should be based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay, and that we want to retain our position at the top of the UK league in respect of widening participation, so that our universities are places that are welcoming and open to students from all backgrounds.

The Budget negotiations will be critical, and I would like to see early progress on those. The whole country, regardless of whether people have an interest in education, health, roads or industry, is looking to the Assembly and the Executive for clarity and certainty. They want to know that we can get in place a Budget that will, at least, chart the way forward to enable us to deal with the very difficult economic issues that we face and to do so with a degree of greater certainty.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Bell for a question. I am sorry; I call Jonathan Craig.

Mr Craig: I do not know whether to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Student Fees

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when he will be in a position to report on any changes to student fees. (AQO 592/11)

9. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures his Department is taking to address the potential increase in student fees. (AQO 597/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 9 together.

There is a legislative cap on what fees Northern Ireland universities can charge. Any change in that will need Assembly approval. Subject to clarification of the budgetary position, my Department will bring forward options and proposals early in 2011 and, subject to Executive agreement, a public consultation on tuition fees and student finance will follow. After the consultation, I will bring proposals to my Executive colleagues for the approval of the House.

Mr Craig: Does the Minister agree that there is an imperative to sort this situation out very quickly, because, although the House can prevaricate over its budgets for the next four years, individuals, especially parents, cannot prevaricate over how they will fund their children going to university? They need some clarification and certainty on the issue, and the sooner that they get it, the better.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for the point that he makes. I am happy to give my complete support to the emphasis on achieving an early resolution to the budgetary considerations that myself and Executive colleagues are undertaking now. It is in the interest of everyone that we bring forward a Budget that can be consulted upon, reviewed and, if necessary, amended, even by the House. There are a number of budget holders in my Department who are keen to see the level of expenditure, or lack of it, that they will have to deal with in the new financial year.

In my view, we cannot risk running through until the end of this financial year before confirming a Budget, because that will have implications for the new financial year and will incur unnecessary costs. So I hope that all parties in the Executive will work together quickly to bring forward a Budget and that external matters, such as by-elections or impending general elections in other jurisdictions, will not affect those deliberations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr P J Bradley is not in his place for question 5. Mr Thomas Burns is not in his place for question 6. Mr Kieran McCarthy is not in his place for question 7. Mr Simpson Gibson is not in his place for question 8. Question 9 has already been answered. Question 10 has been withdrawn. Mr Boylan is not in his place for question 11.

Employment: Training

12. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what level of co-operation exists between his Department and industry to identify training courses which meet employers' requirements. (AQO 600/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I am grateful to so many Members for not turning up today, but I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that the Department has a great deal of contact with local industry, and the focus of our efforts over recent years has been to ensure that the Department's support for training provision mirrors the needs of local industry — a demand-led system. That has been articulated in many departmental publications, such as 'Further Education Means Business' and the skills strategies.

In practical terms, we have engaged with local industry through, among others, the workforce development forums and the sector skills councils, which we sponsor and the role of which is to work with employers to identify current and future skills and training needs and to develop solutions to meet those needs. In addition, the Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills has provided valuable intelligence on future skills needs. We have also engaged with industry on our Bridge to Employment programme over many years.

We are currently working with Invest NI on the Assured Skills programme, which seeks to ensure the delivery of a range of activities and interventions that guarantee potential inward investment companies, or existing investment companies that wish to expand, that Northern Ireland has the ability to satisfy their future skills and training needs. Also, our Skills Solutions service, which is now up and running, has the specific aim of providing employers with a learning and skills service that identifies and helps meet their training needs. Our Skills Solutions advisers have been active across Northern Ireland since September, including in East Londonderry.

Furthermore, qualifications underpin the delivery of all vocational education and training, and the Department is leading on the implementation of the cross-UK vocational qualification reform programme in Northern Ireland. Employers are now at the heart of the system for developing and delivering vocational qualifications, and all vocational qualifications on the new

qualifications and credit framework are based on employer-owned standards and strategies.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give us an assurance that he will encourage industry to communicate its needs to his Department to ensure that suitable courses are provided?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In so far as it is within my power, I certainly do give that commitment.

Mr K Robinson: I am very conscious of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker; thank you very much for calling me to ask a supplementary question. I am sure that the Minister would love to pad out his 30 minutes. Given that most of our industry is based on small family businesses and small industry in general, and given the added difficulty that poses for the Minister's Department in trying to bring skills programmes forward, has he any forethought as to how a basic skills potential might be developed in the workforce so that, when the uplift eventually comes, we will have people partially trained and partially moved along the road towards training?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I am grateful to the Member for his question. It is my priority, as Minister, and that of my departmental officials to have in place the necessary training and skills — both vocational skills and academic opportunities — in preparation for the economic upturn.

3.30 pm

Although there is an economic depression at the moment, it is right that we prepare our workforce for the upturn and give encouragement to young people so that we stand ready to benefit from the opportunities that will come to us, I hope, in the not too distant future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Gerry McHugh is not in his place to ask question 13.

That concludes questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Committee Business

Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill [NIA 3/10] be agreed. — [Mr Weir.]

Mr Weir: I welcome Members' support and thank them for their contributions. It is noticeable that, at the Second Stage, a limited number of Members spoke. That is a good sign, as it shows that there is wide consensus in the House. The Bill is uncontroversial, and everyone accepts that it is common sense. Members therefore took the view that they did not need to add to the volume of debate. Nevertheless, I thank those who contributed.

I will address the issues that were raised, and if Members feel that I did not cover all of them, I am more than happy to write to them.

Declan O'Loan spoke as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. He set out clearly the rationale and principles underlying Part 2 of the Bill. Accountability and transparency are fundamental in upholding confidence in the democratic process, and those principles inform the provisions for the Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The commissioner will be independent. He or she will not need the Assembly's permission to carry out an investigation into an allegation of misconduct; indeed, there will not even need to be a complaint for him to carry out an investigation. The commissioner will have the power to commence an investigation where they believe that a breach of the code may have occurred.

Declan O'Loan reminded us why the Committee on Standards in Public Life has emphasised that such a power is so necessary. He also explained how the Commissioner for Standards will determine how an investigation is to be carried out, albeit within an agreed time frame. The commissioner will be able to reach and express any conclusion on the outcome of an investigation, and the Assembly will always publish those conclusions. That enshrines the notion of transparency in Part 2 of the Bill.

Willie Clarke spoke about the consensus in the Committee on Standards and Privileges

in favour of the provisions in Part 2. He also spoke of how the situation at Westminster has damaged, in many cases unfairly, the perception of all politicians. He concentrated on Part 2 and said that it went some way to rebuilding confidence. It is interesting to note, with reference to holding people to account, that my remarks on Part 1 seem to have been completely ignored by all other Members who spoke. I will take that as suggesting a high level of consensus on my remarks.

Rev Robert Coulter, who is not in the Chamber, issued a clarion call for a return to a Cromwellian era. In other contexts, that might not be shared by all Members. He spoke of the importance of a robust system for holding Members to account and of the values of clarity and transparency. I am pleased that he recognised how the Bill will provide for those principles to be put into practice.

As we move ahead with the Bill, it is clear that there is a high level of consensus on the principles of Parts 1 and 2. When the Bill passes its Second Stage, the next stage is the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee for its detailed scrutiny. That will enable Members to comment on it and to make sure that its detail is absolutely right.

I am confident that the establishment of the independent financial review panel and the Assembly Commissioner for Standards are positive steps forward for the Assembly and that they will significantly enhance the independence, openness and transparency of the processes. Therefore I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill [NIA 3/10] be agreed.

Ad Hoc Committee: Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill

Motion made:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill; and to submit a report to the Assembly by 25 January 2011.

Composition:

DUP 2

Sinn Féin 2

UUP 1

SDLP 1

Alliance 1

Quorum: *The quorum shall be five Members.*

Procedure: *The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — [Ms Ní Chuilín.]*

Private Members' Business

Integrated and Shared Education

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

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report by Oxford Economics, 'Developing the case for shared education'; believes that the current education system is unsustainable; recognises the economic, educational and social benefits that can come from integrated and shared education; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively promote a system of integrated and shared education throughout Northern Ireland.

We are pleased to bring the motion to the House today. It can be broken down into four parts, which we will look at in some detail later. However, at the outset, I confirm that we will not accept the SDLP's amendment, which we see as a dilution of our original proposal.

I will start with a couple of quotations:

"I do not know of any measures which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting children at an early age and bringing them up in the same school".

The second quotation is a bit more current and is slightly shortened:

"For me this is not just an economic but a moral question. We cannot hope to move beyond our present community divisions while our young people are educated separately...I believe that future generations will scarcely believe that such division and separation was common for so long... Future generations will not thank us if we fail to address this issue."

The second quotation was from Peter Robinson, as part of his now famous speech from a few weeks ago. The first was from the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare in 1825. I am making the link that there is a common cause that I was not aware of until now.

I could offer many more statements of support for shared education, some from surprising sources. Indeed, yesterday, we talked about Lord Craigavon, who is on record as being a supporter of the shared education concept. However, as I speak, and despite all that support over the years, our schools are still over 90% segregated.

The maintained sector is pressing ahead with its own post-primary review, which appears to pay scant regard to the needs of our school population as a whole. It is no more than a reorganisation of the Catholic school system. The controlled sector insists that, as a state system, it is open to children of all faiths and none, as, indeed, does the maintained sector, but they both utterly fail, with a few honourable exceptions, to attract pupils from across the divide. There is a major conundrum. As far as I am aware, all the political parties are on record as supporting shared education. All three main sectors — I exclude the Irish-medium sector only for the obvious reason of its unique nature — support the concept. The Department of Education, under the terms of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, has a duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, which means the education together at school of Protestant and Catholic pupils. Would an objective study of the Department's actions in that area conclude that it had tried to carry out that duty with anything approaching enthusiasm? The Department may have facilitated where it had little option, but it has fallen well short on encouragement.

Despite opposition, the integrated movement has made steady progress. It proved that parental choice is a potent force and that children who learn and play together in their early years carry forward attitudes and beliefs that benefit the child and society. Peter Robinson said:

"If one were to suggest that Protestants and Catholics would be educated at separate Universities it would be manifestly absurd; yet we continue to tolerate the idea that at primary and secondary level our children are educated separately."

Are those wise words from a surprising source? We should not be surprised at common sense from whatever source it comes. I continue to welcome the First Minister's statement.

The Oxford Economics report, as others before it, makes the financial and economic case for shared education. It does not come up with a definitive figure, but does anyone continue to doubt that the present arrangements cost hundreds of millions of pounds in duplicated expenditure and that the system is unsustainable? Do the statistics of empty desks, school building and maintenance programmes that are badly behind and the crumbling schools estate and morale not point the way towards an urgent need for cross-sectoral co-operation as an absolute imperative? Does anyone still doubt the economic, educational and social benefits? If so, they live in a different world from me.

What is the way forward? A complete change of mindset is required at all levels. The motion calls on the Minister actively to promote a system of integrated and shared education, which goes going beyond the encouragement and facilitation that is required by the Order. I do not refer solely to the establishment of new integrated schools or transformations. They have their place, which is an important one, but we will never get to where we want to be purely on that basis. We suggest a target, which is that 20% of children should be educated on an integrated basis by 2020.

Where new schools are planned, the Department should survey local residents on the presumption that they will be integrated or inter-Church. The Department should reform and relax the criteria for the creation and maintenance of integrated schools in a way that recognises those children who are of mixed or no religious background. It should review the transformation procedure and recognise the contribution that is being made by mixed schools, which are those with a mixed enrolment but no formal integrated status. I recommend Belfast Royal Academy, which is my old school, as a good example.

We must acknowledge and promote shared learning schemes, of which there are plenty. I know that the Minister favours those. Indeed, we spent most of today's Question Time on that topic. The Sharing Education programme, which is run by Professor Tony Gallagher's group, has just started its second three-year session. The feedback from the first three years from pupils and teachers is extremely positive. As some 60 schools and 5,000 pupils were involved, that is a good sample. Virtually none of the schools

that were involved in that project and in others across the country has reported any difficulties, which perhaps proves that the younger generation has a bit more tolerance than the previous one.

Be that as it may, more radical actions are needed. What does area-based planning mean if decisions continue to be made on a sectoral basis? When will the Department obtain the powers to insist that a maintained school and a controlled school must come together as the only viable solution for a particular area? Are we going to continue to transport children in different directions in order to get to the nearest school in their sector, rather than to the nearest suitable school?

3.45 pm

Recently, I spent time in the Dominican College in Portstewart, which is a maintained school with a Presbyterian headmaster. It is absolutely unique, with 40% of its pupils being Protestant. It manages to maintain a Catholic ethos without causing offence to its Protestant pupils. Religious education is taught jointly and without a problem, and the school co-operates fully with other local schools in a way in which Tony Gallagher would totally approve. It is the way forward and an excellent example of what can be achieved.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No. I am sorry, but I do not have time. You will both have time in which to speak.

Things cannot stay as they are; the situation is unsustainable, so I look forward to the Minister's response.

Having given the First Minister such praise, I will say that the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) document for which his Department is responsible was pretty sparse in acknowledging reality and the problems associated with segregation in the education system. We believe that increased sharing and integration in education to bring children together in their formative years is absolutely fundamental to creating a cohesive and integrated society, and we hope that the final CSI strategy will reflect that widely held view. This is not the first debate that we have had on the subject, and it probably will not be the last. Nevertheless, I hope that the change in mood in the country, along with

the comments of Mr Robinson and others, may produce progress. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first "shared education'" and insert

"; upholds the principle of parental choice in education; recognises the contribution to education made by the various education sectors; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Executive to encourage continued integrating and sharing between the various education sectors to maximise the educational, societal and financial benefits and to protect the provision of local schooling."

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an leasú a mholadh.

I shall begin by outlining the SDLP's position on education provision. We believe in parental choice, whether that is in Irish-medium, maintained, controlled or integrated education, and I have proposed the amendment to recognise that choice. Therefore, I hope that the proposers of the motion will think again. Trevor Lunn extolled the virtues of parental choice in integrated education. If parents can have choice in integrated education, why can they not have it in the other sectors?

We respect the diversity in our system, and we uphold parents' rights. A sign of maturity in society will be people's ability to accept diversity as something that adds richness to their lives, without attempting to colonise under one flag or another. Having said that, much can be done in education to encourage cohesion, sharing and integration without losing diversity. We do not believe that sectors should work in isolation, and there are compelling education, societal and economic reasons why that should not be the case. We encourage the maximum possible sharing in the delivery of the entitlement framework and throughout education phases, from early years to primary education and on to post-primary education.

In planning and provision of the schools estate and in all other aspects of education, there are clear economic reasons why we should share staff, facilities and buildings. Important as those reasons are in the present economic climate, they are not the only or even the most important reasons for doing so. It can only be good educationally for children from various backgrounds to get to know one another as individuals, to be taught and learn together, and to play games and sport together. It is good for

social cohesion that that should happen, and I believe that most parents would welcome it. In a society with a history such as ours, we cannot continue to live in splendid isolation from one another. We must take positive steps to ensure that our education system becomes more integrated than it is at present, promoting sharing while respecting diversity. That can and should be done. Greater sharing in, and integrating of, education cannot and should not be forced on any sector but should be encouraged and fostered in every way possible. It should be done for the right reasons.

Mr Storey: Given the Member's comments about encouraging people to go in a particular direction, does he agree that that is one of the fundamental mistakes that has been made in the debate on academic assessment; that the bully tactics of the Minister of Education have not worked, because we still have academic assessment; and that the duplicity of the SDLP in not accepting the right of parents to choose academic selection has led us to the stalemate that we are in?

Mr D Bradley: I do not accept the particular point that the Member makes. Every attempt has been made to encourage people to come along the path of allowing all children to have access to all types of education, and I hope that we will get to a better place in the future.

As I said, encouragement to share and to integrate should be done for the right reasons and in the right way. The issue should not be used as a political football in an attempt to win votes, as has recently been the case. We should work with the various sectors and encourage them to work together. The various education providers are more aware than most of us of the challenges that are involved. We should listen to them when they tell us what they need to increase sharing, and we should provide them with the tools that they need.

Area-based planning is a useful tool in achieving greater sharing of staff, facilities and buildings for economic and curricular purposes. It is a good basis for greater sharing that goes beyond the mere functional. The professional expertise of teachers is such that the area-learning communities have made reasonable progress on meagre resources and in a short time. As 'Together Towards Entitlement' indicates, there is still much to be done in that area. Instead of reducing the resources available for that work,

we should, in fact, be increasing them, and the Minister of Education should be championing that cause.

We do not underestimate the challenge that greater sharing in education presents, but we should not shy away from it. The work of the area-learning communities is encouraging, as is the work done by the Sharing Education programme managed by Queen's University. The co-operation that exists between the two primary schools in Stewartstown is exemplary, as is that between the two secondary schools in Ballycastle. I am interested in the sharing of sports facilities that has been developed between St Patrick's High School in Keady and Armagh City and District Council. There is a similar project in St Columba's College in Portaferry and an emerging project at St Colman's College in Newry. Those are examples of sharing that is beneficial to the community and the school population. We should build on existing good practice and learn from it.

It is also good that the Churches will consider shared-faith schools. As politicians, we should be working to remove any barriers that may prevent development in that area. Legislative changes are needed to enable the development of more innovative and creative solutions. Under current legislation, there is no mechanism to establish jointly managed schools between sectors or even between phases. As a first step, we must make changes to legislation that will allow greater sharing between and across the sectors. Without those legislative changes, progress will be very difficult to achieve.

The goal of achieving sharing in education may be a long-term one, but it needs to be fostered and encouraged. It is one of the pillars of the SDLP's policy on a shared society, and we will continue to champion it, not only in the weeks ahead but in the months and years to come. I believe that, if we adopt the right approach to the issue by working with the sectors and not attempting to browbeat any sector in any way, we will achieve progress. That is the way to progress. I hope that parties in the House will agree with and support the SDLP amendment. Tá mé buíoch díot, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus sin a bhfuil uaim.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): At the outset, I will make some comments as the Chairperson of the Education Committee and highlight

some key information that the Committee has received on the subject. The Committee is sometimes accused, even by the Minister, of not producing any great amount of work of substance. Therefore, I want to put on record what the Committee has done on the issue.

We received a presentation from Oxford Economics on its paper entitled 'Developing the Case for Shared Education'. At its meeting of 20 October, the Committee also received a presentation from the Integrated Education Fund, which highlighted the results of the 2009 Life and Times Survey. That showed that 62% of people would prefer to send their children to a mixed religion school in contrast to just under 7% of children who attended integrated schools. The Integrated Education Fund representatives also commented on the Department of Education's response to the Committee on the Integrated Education Fund's earlier position paper on segregated education. The Department stated:

"In law, all schools in Northern Ireland are open to all pupils regardless of religion. ... To date, Government has accepted this as an expression of parental wishes and has not attempted to impose integrated schools."

The Integrated Education Fund responded by saying that it believes that we should no longer settle for community segregation as a reason for segregation in schools. Schools that are in receipt of public money should be expected to demonstrate how they are actively seeking to be open to all pupils regardless of religion. From a Committee perspective, perhaps the Minister might explain to the House what her Department meant by:

"To date, Government has accepted this as an expression of parental wishes and has not attempted to impose integrated schools."

Does that imply that the Department's position may change in the near future and that shared education may be a way forward? We await a response from the Minister, who we are glad is in the House this afternoon. Given the Integrated Education Fund's point, what is the Department of Education doing to ensure that all schools are actively seeking to be open to all pupils regardless of religion?

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

Finally, the Committee noted the Queen's University report on options for sharing and collaboration, which concluded that, in the most

successful models of school sharing, ethos and religious traditions are not only protected but strengthened. It would be worthwhile for the Minister and her Department to examine successful models of school sharing and to consider how to further implement those ideas.

I will now speak as a Member of the House. I welcome the opportunity to do so, and I commend the Alliance Party for bringing the motion to the House. I also commend the First Minister, my party leader, for kick-starting the debate. It has generated various responses. The responses that my party and its leader have received are interesting.

Sinn Féin has accused us of attacking Catholic schools. Nothing could be further from the truth. The bishops accused us of denying parental choice. However, it is interesting that the bishops who made that claim — Dominic Bradley referred to Dominican College in Portstewart — are the very same bishops who, in the commission's consultation paper on the review of post-primary education, included Dominican College as one school that will be a sacrificial lamb because of the plans that the bishops and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) have for education in that part of the world.

Moreover, a few weeks ago, Loreto College told us that it had abandoned academic selection. That is not the case. It has rearranged the criteria to ensure that it has a bigger intake of children at the expense of St Joseph's High School in Coleraine and of Dominican College.

Whether the issue concerns a single education system or a single education and library board, people need to come to the debate with integrity, honesty and openness. They need to ensure that their arguments are put in a way that does not threaten, or, as Dominic Bradley said, bully any individual.

4.00 pm

Clarity is needed on what is meant by integrated education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: We do not mean the current system of integrated education, because that was the creation of another sector. We mean a genuine, single system that respects rights, privileges

and having a Christian ethos in schools, and we need to continue to work towards that. I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin will be supporting the SDLP amendment.

As the Chairperson of the Education Committee said, the Alliance Party's motion has brought a debate to the Chamber that has been rumbling in the media and in the education sector for some time, and I welcome the chance to be part of that debate. At the outset, it is fair to say that everyone recognises the need to pursue collaboration between the various sectors in education where possible and to espouse that as much as possible.

I also put on record my recognition of all the sectors in education that work hard for the good of their students: the Irish-medium sector, the Catholic sector, the integrated sector and the controlled sector. Educating young people and assisting them to reach their full potential is most certainly a challenge, and we all aspire to, and recognise the need for, an education system that delivers for all the young people who go through it.

The motion appears to suggest that the Alliance Party is saying that the only way that children and young people can be educated is via integrated education, and that this will be the answer to ending sectarianism in our society. It also appears to suggest that the only factor that is making our schools unsustainable is that there are various education sectors. It needs to be recognised that the education system does not deliver for all our young people. It fails quite a number of them. I remind the House that 4.5% of young people leave school every year without any GCSEs or any equivalent qualifications, and 12.5% leave school with fewer than four GCSEs graded A to G. A 2006 Audit Office report was quite damning and stated that over half of 14-year-old boys who attended non-grammar schools across the North had not achieved basic standards in literacy and numeracy.

Those are some of the examples that make the current education system unsustainable. There is a need to continue to drive through the policies that the Minister has initiated and implemented, particularly Every School a Good School, area-based planning, transfer reforms and, most importantly, the establishment of ESA, which was to drive forward standards. The

Chairperson can laugh all he wants, but, quite frankly, the education of young people is not a laughing matter.

The Oxford Economics paper is a scoping paper with the aim of stimulating debate, and that is why we are debating this issue. The paper gives three reasons why we should look at alternatives, the first of which is international competitiveness. It suggests that we are behind our international competitors, and I believe that no Member disagrees with the idea that we need to build a strong economy and that, to do so, we should work towards the needs of the economy. Young people should be encouraged towards pathways where there are jobs and where there are deficiencies, but, as has been said in many previous debates in the House on education and on the economy, this is not simply an education issue. We need to look at the issue on a cross-departmental basis, with DEL, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the business community becoming involved.

The second reason that the paper gives for the need to change is the financial situation. No one is taking away from the fact that there are obvious financial benefits to collaboration, and, as I said at the outset, I support fully collaboration between, and in, our sectors. They should all be encouraged to work together where possible. Examples were given of where that happens already, and that needs to be built upon. Area-based planning policy, which the Minister is taking forward, should also assist in that process, but we have to be realistic. To ensure sustainability in many schools, they need to work together, and collaboration is necessary, especially in rural areas where there are smaller schools.

The development of ESA is a further issue to be considered in light of financial considerations. It has been said many times in the Chamber that the realisation of ESA would allow the Department to reallocate £20 million to front line services, and it is not good enough that other parties have tried to block that and to play games.

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

Mrs O'Neill: I will come back to ESA in a few minutes' time, and I will let the Member in at that stage.

The third issue that the paper deals with is how our education system works and the fact that it is made up of various sectors. A point that was raised by the proposer of the amendment is that surely that is an issue of parental choice. People are entitled to have their children educated in a system that, in the first instance, promotes equality, but it must also be a system of choice. Again, the issue of ESA arises. The Assembly agreed a position on ESA. There was a Programme for Government commitment to ESA, and Members of the House — I am talking particularly about the Members opposite — voted for that position on the basis that we would streamline education.

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

Mrs O'Neill: Again, however, they have reneged on and shied away from that commitment.

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

Mrs O'Neill: My time has run out.

Mr B McCrea: That was particularly well timed. I must remember that one.

We keep having the same old debate, albeit in different guises. It is a different topic but the same old argument. There is something unedifying about people trying to play politics with our children. There is an issue, and I do not think that anybody can turn round and say that everyone else is playing party politics with it except them. There are some serious issues, and we need to find a way of getting consensus. Part of the problem is that we are trying to do an awful lot with one policy tool. We are trying to look after the rights of individuals to an education, but we also want to get the economy and the environment right. We do not want schoolchildren to travel too far, and some people want to deal with sectarianism in the community. We are trying to do everything with a single policy tool.

People talk about schooling and its problems, and they trot out statistics about how bad things are. However, it must be remembered that 70% of all education comes from outside the school. The issues come from the children's environment, whether they live in social disadvantage or otherwise and from their cultural background. We have to tackle those issues in a holistic way. I am a believer

in integrated education, although, as Mervyn Storey pointed out, it depends on what is meant by "integrated", which is a debate worth having. We might find a common way forward if we were to define it slightly differently.

I have something of a problem with the Alliance Party's motion. I was at the Committee when the paper was put forward, and I understand why it was commissioned and brought forward by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF). As I said, I am a supporter of the IEF, but the motion is a rehash of past positions. We have moved forward. The IEF says that it wants to look at collaboration. Perhaps it is not about bricks and mortar, but about attitudes and minds and how to work together. Perhaps the idea was to generate debate. If so, it was probably overshadowed by the intervention of the First Minister. Whatever his particular motivation, it is worth exploring exactly what we mean by integrated education. Can we have a constructive debate about how we try to deal with such things?

Mr O'Loan: On that point, is the Member as bemused as I am by how the Alliance Party presented the motion? It refers to integrated and shared education, and I am sure that the party chose the two words separately to mean two different things. Yet its Members told us that they absolutely rejected the SDLP amendment, which, it seems to me, defines a broad range of sharing. It would be useful if, later, the Alliance Party would clarify what it means by "sharing". Although the Alliance Party chose to put that word in its motion, when we defined the many different models of sharing that are in place, and whose usage could be increased, its Members rejected that.

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

Mr B McCrea: Perhaps there was a certain looseness in the drafting of the motion. It seems to be a reiteration of age-old arguments, rather than bringing anything new to the debate. I share with the Member the notion that choice, particularly informed parental choice, is important. Although some people will favour integrated education, others will favour a faith-based education system, but one in which there is collaboration. Where possible, we should try to engage parents in the education of their children.

The Alliance Party's argument about why the system is non-sustainable is confusing. The real reason why it is unsustainable is the number

of empty desks in schools. However, society must make the choice about whether to merge schools from a similar sector or from across sectors. Other models have been envisaged, and I am sure that the Member will be aware of the work of one of the pro-vice chancellors of Queen's University, Tony Gallagher, who has looked at the different models and ways of schools' working together. I do not dismiss existing ideas, but we can deal with the issue in that context.

The most important people in children's education are parents. They should be involved, informed and given the opportunity to do what they think is best for their children. We should, of course, take on board the views of children and others, but who knows better than parents? My party supports the fundamental right of choice, although unlimited choice is not economically viable. Nevertheless, where it is viable, we should give people choice. Where it is not, we must explain to them that we are working under financial constraints and we are trying to get them together.

We did not object to ESA's way of streamlining the administration of schools. Rather, we objected to changing the purpose of ESA to do something that it was not originally intended to do. If parties want us to work constructively together to find a way that satisfies most people's concerns, we will not be found wanting.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr B McCrea: We support the SDLP amendment.

Mr Hilditch: Like others, I welcome today's debate. Northern Ireland is going through significant changes, and we are trying to break down the barriers of segregation. We cannot expect to end divisions in society if we continue to educate our children separately. There is no doubt that continuing to do so will leave the doors wide open for the sort of problems that we have been trying to eradicate over the past few years. The benefits of a shared education system are not merely financial but will play a role in transforming society. We want Northern Ireland to aim for a shared future.

The first phase of the sharing education programme commenced in September 2007. In its first three years, more than 5,000 pupils from more than 60 schools benefited from additional educational opportunities across

a wide range of curricular and extracurricular activities. The shared programme contributes practically to the role that education has to play in shaping the future of Northern Ireland through the continuing development of area learning communities. Schools involved in partnerships will be able to bring their experiences of partnership working to their communities.

Some pupils said that the project gave them the chance to do subjects that they would not have otherwise done, to meet other people and to learn new things. Others said that they got to see someone else's school and the differences between schools. It is not only pupils who gain from shared education, parents and teachers can form relationships across cultural and traditional barriers. Teachers said that many of our problems stem from ignorance and that children's going to school together can only broaden their education.

The programme has released the imagination and creativity of staff, pupils and parents, and their response has been astounding and inspirational. There is no doubt that the programme enables young people to gain academic and vocational qualifications as well as invaluable life-learning experiences that they can use in their journey into adulthood.

As has been mentioned, Queen's University set out on a mission to reveal the educational benefits of a shared education in 2007. It believes that a shared education will bring considerable and demonstrable educational and community benefits to Northern Ireland. The partnerships that majored in primary to secondary school partnership arrangements offered different kinds of impacts. The educational benefits to primary schools with limited resources were clear, and reference was made to the timeliness of intervention before attitudes hardened. They have demonstrated the enormously positive potential in collaborative learning.

4.15 pm

Let us not forget that there is more to shared education than education and social issues. There are also financial gains, with the Bain report suggesting that up to £75 million could be saved if schools work collaboratively. The shared education model should provide practical evidence that collaboration can work to the benefit of schools and pupils.

Mr Bell: On Monday, I had a group of students up here from Queen's University. They said that there was no way that they would ever allow a further education system in which blacks were discriminated against compared to whites, in which Catholics were separated from Protestants, or in which Hindus were separated from Muslims. They asked me why, then, we do that at initial education. Does it not make economic sense to follow the model that Peter Robinson outlined and to go for shared education from day one?

Mr Hilditch: Mr Bell makes a valid point. I am glad that he interjected.

Much higher levels of collaboration, joined-up thinking, joined-up action and integrated working will shape the future of Northern Ireland. As a society, we do not want to persist with division. Future generations will not thank us if we fail to address the issue. At a time when public money and resources are extremely limited, schools should work together to maximise effectiveness.

It is hoped that shared education is adopted, taken on board and encouraged by schools. Our children deserve more during their education and aspire to an integrated future. We have the opportunity to transform the education experience. Therefore, I ask for a joined-up approach from all relevant Departments, as has been suggested, so that we can make that change sooner rather than later.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As my colleague Michelle O'Neill said, we support the SDLP amendment. However, it is our view that if no amendment had come forward, the Alliance Party motion was broad enough for us to offer it our support. The motion can be interpreted in a number of ways and, as this is politics, we interpreted it in the way that we chose.

Speaking as a DUP Member, the Chairperson of the Committee said that there has to be "integrity, honesty and openness" in the debate; three brave words for any politician to come out with in any debate. So, let us have a wee bit of openness around where the motion, and Peter Robinson's speech several weeks ago, came from.

I note the Oxford Economics report. However, it does not advance the debate. It relied largely on information that was available to Members, and perhaps elaborated on that, but that was its only value.

I have listened to the contributions, particularly those from the DUP Benches and DUP commentators, around Mr Robinson's speech on moving towards integrated education. It may be more open, honest and fair to say that it was more about closing down Catholic education than it was about integrated education. If someone is serious about any radical proposal, they choose carefully how they deliver it, where they deliver it and how the message is broadcast. I have said on several occasions, but it is worth repeating, that Mr Robinson chose to deliver his speech at Castlereagh Borough Council, chose to speak to a largely unionist audience and chose to tell the audience that he wanted to close down Catholic education, to which he got a positive response.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: I know that the Member protects the Minister, but it is a pity that he does not advise her. Yesterday, at St Dominic's Grammar School, the Education Minister was in front of a grammar school audience. What did she say?

A Member: Today.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: I got the day wrong.

She battered them over the head with academic selection. She did not have the decency to engage with that sector in an open, honest and fair way. Therefore, I will not take a lecture on behalf of my party leader as to when and how he conducts his business.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr O'Dowd: Point taken. However, as someone who has worked closely with the Education Minister for several years, I assure the Member that she does not need protecting. She is more than capable of protecting herself.

The fact of the matter is that the DUP has not entered this issue from the path of righteousness. The DUP has not entered this with the genuine concern that it wants to see integrated education or tackle sectarianism. Rather, it entered it because it sees the Catholic education sector as a threat to its vision of society. That is, in my opinion, why the DUP raised the subject. It does not see it as threat because of Catholic religious teaching or theology, but because of the way in which the nationalist community is educated. The DUP

wants to break that down to create a schooling system that produces a ceramic vision of each other as little Northern Irishers. That is a mistake in itself.

No one can argue against shared education or an integrated education system as part of our vision for the future. However, we are where we are. We have parental choice, and, as far as I am aware, all the parties around the Chamber support that. Parents have a right to decide where to send their children and, in the majority of cases, they send their children to their local school. That is particularly true of the primary-school sector. Parents do not look around and see a Catholic school or a state school. Rather, they see a good local primary school and make the decision to send their children there.

We live in a divided society, and, naturally, many in the Catholic community send their children to Catholic primary schools and secondary schools, and those in the unionist community send their children to controlled schools. That is a result of our society, and it is not the fault of the education system that we have a divided society. When sectarianism and the divisions in our society are debated, it is a mistake for us to point to the education system, claim that the blame lies there and feel that we would have a better society if only we were to educate our children together. That is part of the answer and solution, but it is not the answer in its totality. It is easy for someone to present the argument that they oppose sectarianism and will challenge it by challenging faith-based education or Catholic education. That is not a challenge to sectarianism, but, in fact, it raises its spectre.

Sinn Féin will not be found wanting when it comes to encouraging and moving towards shared education facilities. It will also not be found wanting in encouraging any sector to move in that direction.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr O'Dowd: However, we are where we are. I call on people not to point the finger at the education system and blame it for the sectarianism in our society.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion as tabled. The venue in which my party leader chose to deliver his speech last month is totally irrelevant. However, I welcome the quotation that Trevor Lunn made from that speech when

moving the motion. In that speech, Peter Robinson outlined his vision for an integrated education system, and although there are those in some quarters who believe it to be some form of Damascene moment, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, anyone who looks back over the debates in the Chamber during the past number of years will note the repeated position of DUP Members and their desire to have an integrated education system. However, what we mean by an integrated education system is not the same as that which exists in the integrated sector, a point that Mervyn Storey was starting to expound on when his time came to a close.

We have been steadfast in our belief that no sector should be favoured over others, which is the case when it comes to viability criteria and club banking for the integrated and Irish-medium sectors. Such favouritism costs money. Those issues have been debated on numerous occasions in the Chamber, and the usual silo-mentality based comments have been drawn from vested interests and their apologists from inside and outside of the Assembly, which is much like the reaction from the Catholic Church, the SDLP and Sinn Féin to Peter Robinson's statement. In his own very eloquent way, my colleague Mr Storey expounded on the responses received by my party leader.

There needs to be a reality check. Constant lip service is paid to a shared future by Members on the Benches opposite, and if that is truly what is wanted, one of the primary origins of division, the school system, needs to be addressed. I listened to Mr Bradley extolling why there needs to be sharing in education. He spoke of sectors not continuing to live in splendid isolation and cited many good examples of that working in practice. However, he objects to moving forward in a manner that is more than aspirational. What he is really looking to do is to reinforce the sectors.

There are numerous advantages to an integrated education system, and Mr Lunn has set them out. The motion refers to economic, educational and social benefits. I have already touched on the cost of sectoral favouritism. A Sinn Féin Member raised the matter of ESA, but clarity needs to be brought to that issue before we get lost in Sinn Féin spin. Sinn Féin knows rightly that it is the lack of equality in the Bill that was presented that made it unworkable. The DUP is not opposed to the idea of a single

education board. However, we have difficulties with what is on offer, because it favours some sectors over others. The sector that would suffer most notably at the hands of the Education Bill would be the controlled sector.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

It is clear that Members, particularly those on the Benches opposite, were partial in the elements of Peter Robinson's speech that they listened to. In the very same speech where he referred to a single education system — a speech that he made at Castlereagh Borough Council offices — Peter Robinson also referred to a single education board. That seems to have been overlooked because it does not suit the party on the Benches opposite to hear that part.

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

Miss McIlveen: Just for clarity, the speech was made not in Castlereagh Borough Council offices but at the La Mon Hotel.

We will go back a bit and talk about parental choice, which was raised by Sinn Féin and the SDLP, particularly in its amendment. Both those parties wish to destroy parental choice in academic selection, and thus to destroy grammar schools. Therefore, there is a certain amount of hypocrisy around the idea of parental choice.

Turning to social benefits —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No, I do not have time, but thank you anyway.

Peter Robinson referred to separate schooling in Northern Ireland as:

“a benign form of apartheid, which is fundamentally damaging to our society.”

As my colleague Mr Bell said before he left, we do not educate our young people in separate universities, so why do we teach them in different schools? By doing it, we become entrenched in our differences. Why wait until adulthood? Separate schooling normalises division. As you would expect, I support Peter Robinson's call for a commission to be established to produce recommendations on a process of integration, as he outlined in his speech. That would be money well spent, not only because of the savings that could be made

but to lay the foundations for what would be a truly shared future.

Although the Oxford Economics report does not set out the same vision, it does highlight the absurdities of the current position. It is a scoping paper and, therefore, throws up matters for debate. It is important that that debate should occur. There is no point in certain bodies retreating to their silos and refusing to contribute positively. Education is not about protecting vested interests. It is about teaching our children to best prepare for adulthood. It is about opening their minds, not inculcation. The debate has now begun. We know the cost of division, and it is not counted simply in monetary terms. It is now a matter of taking steps to address it.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Members for tabling the motion and the SDLP for its amendment. Reflecting on the debate, we are faced with four challenging issues. The first is the need to build a genuinely shared future in Northern Ireland that is based on respect, understanding and working together. That is crucial, not only for the good of our communities and future generations but for the future success of our economy. The education system has a crucial role to play in that.

The second issue is that we face significant fiscal constraints that will place serious strain on the Department of Education. That is coupled with a significant increase in the number of empty seats in our schools. There is, therefore, a genuine need to rationalise our schools estate. The 2006 Bain report suggested that it might be possible to save up to £75 million in the education budget if schools worked collaboratively.

The third issue facing us is an existing system that was developed over time and based on ethos education, which, although having its faults, is working in the main.

There is proof that faith-based schools provide better results than schools that do not have a defined ethos. The crucial element linked to that point is parental choice. The Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports the principle of parental choice and recognises that it is a key element in any civilised society.

4.30 pm

The fourth element is the rural/urban split in provision and sustainability. There is no doubt that rural schools are under more pressure when it comes to sustainability than their urban

counterparts. However, rural schools can form the backbone of local communities and, in many cases, keep them viable.

The motion reflects some of the changing thinking in the integrated education sector, which is welcome. That sector is beginning to recognise that there is a need for a more organic approach to sharing instead of just going down the Integrated — with a capital “i” — route, which could lead to new schools opening at the expense of existing schools or to a heavily centralised and top-down approach whereby our education system is essentially secularised by the state. However, the wording of the motion does not reflect adequately the need for community buy-in and commitment when it comes to any changes in our education system.

It is worth reflecting on some other recent developments. In a recent speech, the First Minister, who has been referred to, appeared to be advocating a secularisation of the education system. That would see a more centralised approach, which would remove the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the maintained sector and the Protestant Churches in the controlled sector, thus creating a one-state system.

The true motives of that move can be debated another time. However, that approach ignores the right of parental choice and the needs of local communities. The Ulster Unionist Party strongly believes that we should be rationalising with a view to sharing. We should be promoting cross-sectoral collaborations, be they formal, through the entitlement framework, or informal. We must be looking towards future rationalisation, be that by exploring shared faith schools, community schools or shared facilities, predicated on community buy-in and support. Shared services and facilities might also be appropriate, if encouraged by area planning.

However attractive the rhetoric in support of a single state system for Northern Ireland might be, especially for financial reasons, it is unachievable until a consensus can be created to bring it about. Megaphone tactics simply will not work.

The proposers of the motion regularly draw attention to the costs of division. We all know that there are costs associated with division, but there is the same argument about the peace walls. We all want the peace walls to come down, but, if Mr Lunn lived in Cluan Place, maybe he would be less enthusiastic about bringing the peace walls down. It is very good to

bring them down as long as one does not live near them. We have to understand where our society is.

The way forward will not be more “commissionitis”, as the Member for Strangford thinks. The way ahead is for parties in the House to sit down and discuss the issues together. We do not need more commissioners. We can discuss the issues; that is what we are here for. I do not see the need for more commissions, but I do see the need for proper dialogue.

We have to be realistic and recognise the right of parents to choose as well as the economic realities. We have the capacity, if we put our minds to it, to bring a debate forward with proper inter-party dialogue so that we will be able to advance the case.

Mrs M Bradley: I have no intention of reiterating everything that my colleague Dominic Bradley said earlier in the debate. Therefore, I will keep my contribution short.

The SDLP supports integrated education because we support freedom of choice. That is why we chose to table an amendment to the motion.

Parents and children should be able to be educated in whichever medium they choose, and the same provision should be afforded to every child. It is because of our support for parental choice that we were disappointed by the First Minister's remarks about faith-based schools. Echoing the CSI strategy, the First Minister's stance on integrated education has further proved that the Executive is more about entrenchment than integration.

Each education sector has brought significant benefits to schooling in the North, and I want to make special mention of the work of my local schools and the very successful way in which they work with the learning communities.

The SDLP is deeply committed to protecting the provision of local schooling. For a number of years, the Department of Education has been closing down schools, especially in rural areas. As finances get tighter, we fear that that trend could accelerate. For that reason, integrating and sharing in education has become paramount. Few issues in government can truly be said to save money and provide societal good. If managed correctly, however, that could be one such area.

In addition to supporting integrated education, it is imperative that the Department of Education assist each sector in sharing resources to proceed towards better integration. The amendment standing in my party's name offers a fair and cohesive way forward, and it expands rather than negates the motion. I urge all Members with a view to fairness, integration and cohesion to support the amendment, as I do.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and the opportunity to discuss the many issues that the motion raises. I thank my colleague Trevor Lunn as one of those who brought the motion to the House.

Before getting into the detail of the Oxford Economics report, 'Developing the case for shared education', we need to confront all divisions, including segregation based on social status, rather than simply cherry-pick those that sit neatly with particular party political perspectives. I am for integrated and secular state education, but that cannot mean the imposition of the culture and ethos of one political perspective at the expense of another.

An inclusive education system with which everyone can feel affinity should be developed in partnership and agreement with all sectors of the education system. That cannot mean hockey instead of hurling, English instead of Irish or Oliver Cromwell instead of Pádraig Pearse. However, it would be a mistake for anyone — I agree with my colleague John O'Dowd on this — to lay the blame for segregation and sectarianism in our society at the doorstep of education, or on those who championed education during very dark days in the history of this state. Our current education system has evolved as a result of sectarianism; it is not the cause of that sectarianism.

Tá cuid mhór easamláirí ann den dea-chleachtas sa chóras oideachais, ach aontaím nach bhfuil an córas reatha inbhunaithe. There are many good examples of good practice in our education system, but I agree that the current education structure is unsustainable. The Assembly has already voted in favour of a single system: the Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

Let me remind Members what they voted to support. The ESA will be a single system of administration to support a diversity of

schools; a system that will promote equality while preserving choice; a system that puts the needs of children and young people before the needs of institutions; and a system that empowers school leaders to drive change and improvement.

The educational case for change is clear. Our education system is failing many of our most vulnerable young people, and I will not rehearse those arguments. Michelle O'Neill spoke about them.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. The financial case is also compelling. Under the Education and Skills Authority, it will be possible to redirect £20 million a year from administration to front line services. The findings of the Oxford Economics report support a range of policies that I have already introduced. It could be said, however, that the report tells us merely what the Assembly has already concluded.

The case for the ESA is clear. The legislation for the ESA is ready, and it awaits the DUP living up to its public pronouncements that it wants to tackle bureaucracy, to invest in front line services and, most importantly, to improve standards, especially for young people from deprived areas.

We have some five working months left in the present Assembly mandate. That is five months to lead a once-in-a-generation reform, and five months to modernise and secure the future of our children's education, and, in turn, our economic potential to build out of recession. I am not standing still in the interim. I have progressed with convergence plans to secure savings in the confines of the current system.

Today must be my lucky day, because I am highlighting DUP wriggling on hooks. Get off the hooks. Get off the hooks on academic selection. You have abandoned your 1989 policy. I told you earlier, and I do not need to go into it again.

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

The Minister of Education: No. The Minister will not give way.

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

The Minister of Education: I will not give way, because we have listened to the Member. Now he is jumping up and down because he knows that he is wriggling on a hook again. The DUP offered up excuse after excuse for failing to progress the ESA. One minute it was one thing, the next minute it was something else, and now the party is looking for another reason. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: You can see that the party is getting jittery when its Members are jumping up and down. Can they explain to the front line why they are squandering the opportunity to save £80 million by establishing the ESA? I welcome change. I love change. People know that. I welcome debate.

I agree with Declan O'Loan that it is amusing to see the DUP change policy so quickly; however, it forgot to tell its Members that it had done so. Therefore they heard about it on TV or after their leader, Peter, talked at Castlereagh council.

Mervyn gave a wonderful speech supporting the integrating of education. He is on the board of governors of a school that wants to transform. Parents voted for it — parental choice in action — but, lo and behold, who tried to block it but Mervyn and one of his councillors.

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

The Minister of Education: No; I will not give way. The Member had his chance. The Member would do well to be polite and listen for a change. There were other comments on integrating from none other than Iris Robinson. She said, and I assure Members that these are not my words, that the philosophy of the integrated lobby:

"consists of nothing else other than self-righteous, pompous claims of reconciliation, no more amazing than claiming that they can fit 200 people into the back seat of a Mini."

People are entitled to change, and I welcome that; however, the problem is that they do not get it all joined up. At today's Question Time, a Member of the DUP came out against one of the most innovative projects of sharing.

If we are to have this debate, Members cannot do 90-degree turns. As Reg Empey said in his very considered contribution, let us have real

discussion not megaphone diplomacy, and let us do it on the basis of respect.

Calls are made for one system, only to be followed by attacks on the Irish-medium sector. Why would you do that if you wanted real debate? Let us have a real debate here. The way to go forward is on the basis of respect.

I was asked about integrated education. I take my statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education very seriously. Since I became Minister of Education, the number of children attending integrated schools has increased from 17,600 to more than 20,700; I have approved development proposals for a new grant-maintained integrated post-primary college; I have transformed three existing primary and one post-primary school to integrated status; I have established one integrated statutory nursery school; and I have approved 71 capital schemes in 28 schools in the sector to the value of more than £10 million.

Let us talk about post-primary transfer. Of course, as the integrated sector recognises, a fully integrated school does not just mean bringing together all communities; it means a school that operates admissions that do not reject children on the grounds of ability. This morning, I spoke at St Dominic's with the President of Ireland, Uachtarán na hÉireann, and I was absolutely true to my principles.

My principles are that public money should be spent in areas of high social need. The week before last, I was in the Belfast Model School for Girls; today, I was on the lower Falls. However, I said clearly in St Dominic's that it must use public money wisely and it is important that it does not erect barriers for children. That is my party's position. Everyone knows that. Sinn Féin does not wriggle on hooks; Sinn Féin takes policy positions and speaks up for what it believes in.

Unfortunately, two of our integrated post-primary schools persist in partial academic selection, but, apart from that, I am pleased that the sector as a whole recognises that an ethos of welcoming and valuing all children is incompatible with academic selection at 11 years old, as reflected in the Department's transfer guidance. I hope that the two schools that operate partial selection will stop doing so.

4.45 pm

We must address social division — the class divide — which, like the academic selection of the past, is extremely damaging. It was a failed system, socially and educationally, which created and sustained injustice and inequality. It is fundamentally immoral and has no place in a modern, progressive and enlightened society.

I absolutely agree with Reg Empey about the importance of the entitlement framework and area-learning communities. As I said earlier, and as Trevor Lunn also mentioned, the entitlement framework provides new opportunities for pupils to achieve their full potential. There cannot be four A-level classes in the same town doing the same course over a two-year period when those classes have only four or five pupils.

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

The Minister of Education: I do not know what part of the word no or níl the Cathaoirleach does not understand.

We need to use resources wisely. It stands to reason that allowing pupils access to a wider range of courses that interest them, which are relevant to their future career aspirations and which reflect the economy's needs, will give them the best possible chances. Some amazing work is being done. A few weeks ago, I was in north Belfast with 600 teachers from every sector. They came together on a day when schools were off to discuss how they could timetable and work together. Area-based planning is needed.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. Everybody in the Chamber had an opportunity to be heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been fairly tolerant. First, the Minister indicated to a number of Members that she will not give way. Secondly, there must not be an ongoing commentary from a sedentary position. I ask Members to respect the House.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Benefits are to be realised through greater sharing in education. A unique opportunity has arisen through the gifting of the Lisanelly site in Omagh for education purposes. That landmark project offers the opportunity to bring together a number of Omagh schools on the Lisanelly site and to plan the campus to include shared, state-of-the-art

facilities, to which all young people in Omagh will have access. I will go there on 25 November 2010. I look forward to my visit very much.

Aithníonn mo dhréacht-pholasaí um chaidreamh pobail, comhionannas agus ilchineálacht san oideachas go bhfuil comhoibriú ar siúl cheana féin.

My draft policy for community relations, equality and diversity in education recognises that collaboration already exists and, more important, seeks to build on that greater sharing and collaboration. As I said, a great deal of collaboration is happening, and Dominic Bradley mentioned some of it. It does my heart good to see different uniforms in different schools in areas where one would not expect to see that.

When I visited the Belfast Model School for Girls, one teacher told me of how she works with Coláiste Feirste on the Falls Road. Teachers are way ahead of many politicians because they actively encourage and support collaboration. Indeed, the Integrated Education Fund has indicated that more than 1,000 schools — more than 80% of schools — are already engaged in some form of shared education. Is that enough? No. Can more be done? Yes. My Department encourages more to be done. Indeed, with any funding streams that are coming on board, whether for extended schools or shared education, we encourage clustering and schools to get together. Members would be genuinely amazed to see what goes on. Young people should be educated together. We must find ways to do that through the diversity of provision that exists at present.

The Oxford Economics report is simply a scoping exercise; the authors acknowledge that. I noted in the Hansard report that when the Integrated Education Fund presented its report to the Committee for Education, members expressed concerns, including the failure to address key economic issues; the fact that the financial argument did not stack up; the lack of depth; and the failure to address barriers to shared education. I agree with all those concerns. We need to deal with issues of parental choice, community readiness and political impetus. We will do that. It is noteworthy that the author acknowledged that there is little difference between the IEF's recommendations and those of the Bain report, in which my Department has been actively involved.

Representatives from the integrated education fund also acknowledged that cost savings will

not be made through sharing at first, and that, initially, it will cost money. There was recognition that savings are most likely when schools come together on a single campus similar to the Lisanelly site, which I have already outlined.

This is a complex agenda, and has been seen in recent weeks, it is often viewed as a sensitive subject on which there are differing views. Greater integration and sharing is something to which we should all aspire. It will come about as a result of the comprehensive, robust and evidence-based approach in which my Department is actively engaged. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr McDevitt: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I think that we will all agree that this is a debate that needs to start: in fact, I guess that it has started. I rise to sum up and conclude the debate on the amendment that was tabled in order to frame the debate and put it in a better context, one that is rooted in a series of basic principles that have been echoed by colleagues in Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party and by my colleagues in the SDLP. There is the basic principle of choice, which acknowledges that parents have the right to pick and do what they believe is best for their children and that that right should not be fettered or undermined in any way in order to achieve a political outcome.

The second principle is one of reconciliation and the genuine sense and determination to try and build a better future for education based on respect for the diversity in our society.

Mr Humphrey: Is the Member aware that Queen's University in Belfast and Vanderbilt University in Nashville have a sister-city relationship? Recently, I met some academics from Vanderbilt. They were amazed that this city does not have an integrated education system and that due to the fact that we live in a divided city, people do not get the opportunity to meet people from other religions until they go to university or into the world of work? How can we build the sort of society that the Member is talking about when we retain the status quo in education?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Humphrey for his intervention. I do not think that there is a single person in the House who is arguing for a segregated education system for ever and a day. I did not hear one single Member.

Mr Humphrey: They argued for the status quo.

Mr McDevitt: No. I heard no one argue for the status quo. In fact, I heard everyone argue for evolution.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

Declan O'Loan asked about clarity earlier in relation to the Alliance Party. However, the Member's party's amendment is not clear. It contains the word "sectors". Does that include grammar schools, or does it relate to institutions such as maintained schools and controlled schools? Will the Member clarify what he means by sectors? Will he give parental choice to parents who want to use grammar schools?

Mr McDevitt: Our policy on that matter is clear. We believe in the right to ethos-based education, but we also believe in the opportunity of shared ethos-based education. We do not believe that there is a cohesive or credible argument proven anywhere in the world for selecting children at 10 to 11 years of age. I do not know too many educators who believe it either. One either accepts or does not accept that argument.

The key issue at the heart of today's debate is about whether we are going to be capable of building on what we have achieved and whether we can take the best bits of faith-based and ethos-based education and make them better by building on shared facilities, as we are able to do. To some extent, that is the easy part. It is also about exploring ways in which we can remove the legislative barriers to shared-faith schools over time, as Dominic Bradley suggested.

The question for us is not whether we can look back to a solution that would have fitted well in an old multicultural analysis of Maggie Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s or whether we can reinvent education in this region that is not based on the notion that we have a shared allegiance to a particular outcome, but on our diversity and the need for intercultural dialogue. That is a principle that we could be seeing a lot more of in our debates. If we had more of that in our cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, we would have a much better situation in which to frame this debate.

Basil McCrea makes a very important point. Education cannot solve all of our problems. It cannot tackle the crisis in sustainability in our regions; it cannot deal with every division in our society; our children are not the pawns through

which we will recast and deal with all of our problems.

However, I am quite clear when I say that we have a massive and shared duty to be able to acknowledge that, if we are to reframe and recast education in this century, we will have to do so by building on respect for the system that has evolved and for what has worked in the past, without in any sense being complacent about the fact that change is needed. The systems have evolved because of bad politics in the twentieth century. Indeed, those points emerged in our debate yesterday when we discussed Lord Craigavon's legacy.

As I said, again in response to Mr Humphrey, no one argued for the status quo. I did not hear anyone say in the House today that the way that we have done things in the past is the way that we will do them in the future. I do not know of a single state around the world with a faith-based or ethos-based system that has not outperformed the non-ethos-based system. That is not a personal opinion; I do not say that because I have a particularly strong ethos — it may or may not be the case that I do. It is a matter of fact. We have a very strong ethos in our education system, and we should not lose it.

We are very privileged to have some very fine schools in my constituency, and when I look at them, I see institutions that bring a very important mix of identity and commitment to educational excellence. The opportunity that we have in the months and years ahead is to take the conversation forward —

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

Mr McDevitt: It is also to understand that, in sharing, there is massive opportunity and that it should not be assumed that a single analysis or basic system will work.

Dr Farry: I welcome the debate, and it is important that we have it. In many respects, this issue is now at the top of the political agenda, and, as far as I am concerned, it is about time. Some of the contributions have been helpful and constructive, some have been realistic and, unfortunately, some have not. Every time that we talk about sharing and integrating education, there is a dangerous tendency for us to relapse into the same old tired debate on academic selection, which has been debated here many times.

We certainly cannot go on with our education system as we have been in Northern Ireland. Major financial, economic, social and human costs result from the segregation that exists in our education system, specifically the fact that we have 70,000 empty school places. That situation is only set to get worse, notwithstanding the short-term demographic blip that we have had. We have inefficiencies in the schools estate, which means that there are excessive costs for things such as maintenance and running costs. There are also inefficiencies in school support services. Those are all costs that the public purse has to bear, bearing in mind that we are talking about a time of quite severe financial pressure.

We have perhaps the highest spending per capita on education of anywhere in the UK, but, at the same time, we are investing less directly in our pupils. That must point to the fact that something is going badly wrong with the way in which we are organising our system. We have a huge backlog of school maintenance projects and a lot of demands for new capital investment. We clearly have too many resources tied up in the existing inefficient schools estate. Therefore, things have to change for the better.

The Alliance Party reckons that the current inefficiencies in our system cost the public purse perhaps around £300 million a year. Obviously, we are not going to release all that in the near future, but we have to start on that journey. In the short to medium term we can perhaps realise £50 million, £60 million or £70 million if we are prepared to take the bold leaps and put in place the correct policies. It is quite right to observe, as Mr Humphrey did, that our system looks very strange to international visitors. It is not the norm internationally. It does not fit well with people who are looking at it from the point of view of other experiences. That applies particularly to those from the United States, where there is a very strong legacy of segregation.

Mr McDevitt: On the point of international visitors, will the Member not concede that it is not just our education system that looks a bit strange? To most people coming to this part of our little island for the first time, our society looks a little strange. This issue is about which way you want to argue. To argue that education is the cause of division and that if we were to fix it we would not look strange is to seriously simplify the real challenge that we have, which is to build reconciliation in our society.

5.00 pm

Dr Farry: That is also a reason not to do anything to fix the education system.

Mrs Foster: Is the Member aware of the excellent work that takes place in Fermanagh through shared future projects? Some 30% of primary-school children are involved in a shared project that gains international backing from Atlantic Philanthropies and from the International Fund for Ireland. It is an excellent project and one that should be looked at from a Northern Ireland context.

Dr Farry: I am happy to recognise that, and as someone who comes from a Fermanagh background, I am particularly pleased to do so.

The Member's point about funding from the international community is also relevant, in that the international community feels the need to invest in sharing in education. Elsewhere in the world, that would be funded through the taxation system. We should be very sober about that. The international community recognises that things need to change and the state has failed to respond to the situation.

I want to respond to Mr McDevitt, who said that evidence suggests that, internationally, faith schools are much more successful. I respect what faith schools have achieved in Northern Ireland. I went to a faith school, and I am here. I will let people draw their own conclusions from that. However, the evidence is not as clear-cut as Mr McDevitt seems to suggest. Look at what is happening in Scandinavia. Those countries do not have faith-based systems, but they have the best results throughout their entire system. Look at South Korea, which has made the biggest leap forward in educational standards in recent years, but does not have a faith-based system. Mr McDevitt claims that faith-based systems are the only ones, but cites no other evidence from throughout the world. He has not looked very far.

Mr McDevitt: I did not say that.

Dr Farry: The Hansard report will reflect what was said.

Let me be clear: the Alliance Party's motion is about integrated and shared schools. We do not necessarily argue for a single integrated system. That may well come some day in the future, and we may welcome it. For today, I acknowledge that we have different sectors and that those sectors will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. However, in that context, it is right that

we continue to promote integrated schools as the most sustainable form of education. I must say that I am not impressed by how the Department has fulfilled its duty, which was imposed on it in 1989, to promote integrated education. Far too often, there is a sense that integrated schools are a further fragmentation of a fragmented system, rather than a solution to the problem.

It is important that we recognise that the debate is evolving. Beyond integrated schools, there are options for shared schools, shared campuses, joint-faith schools and simple co-operation and collaboration between schools through, for example, the entitlement framework, and we welcome all that. All that can be copper-fastened by policies such as sustainable schools, area planning and, at the top of the pile, the Education and Skills Authority. Major benefits are to be had from sharing in education: dealing with falling rolls; preserving the local option, rather than children having to be bussed out of small communities because the sectors want to maintain separation; recognising the evolving identity of our society; and giving young people the full opportunity to mix and interact with people across the board.

The Alliance Party does not support the SDLP amendment. On its own, it is not that objectionable, but, in the context of the motion, it is a clear dilution of what we are saying. For some, the difference may be like dancing on the head of a pin. However, there are two important, subtle points that I want to stress. First, the SDLP amendment would remove our reference to the existing system as unsustainable, which Sinn Féin's Education Minister and spokespersons were prepared to accept. Anyone who looks objectively at our system has to recognise that the way in which we do things is unsustainable. I am disappointed that the SDLP amendment would remove that. The SDLP says that it is for progress, but its members' comments today came across as an attempt to defend an unsustainable status quo and to hold back the tide through rhetoric.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I have given way already, and I still have a few comments to make.

My party and I fully support the notion of parental choice. However, there is a danger in using parental choice as a slogan in defence of the status quo. Let us not leave ourselves on the wrong side of the debate. Support for

parental choice is important to parents, and we will not have a situation in which all schools are the same. There will be a whole range of different options in education. However, we do not have the luxury of turning choice into a fundamental right to separate sectors in our education system. European human rights instruments, which talk about the need to recognise faith and diversity in education, allow states the choice of doing that through a single system or through separate sectors that they choose to fund. However, there is no international human rights standard that states that people must have a separate schools system and must have choice in that way.

Parental choice is an important vehicle. Throughout the years, people in Northern Ireland have consistently said that they want more integrated, shared and mixed schools, but the system has not been flexible enough to meet the demands of parents. Parents are voting with their feet and saying that they want sharing, so let us go in that direction.

I want to address the comments made by Peter Robinson. The motion is not based on what he said. The Oxford Economics report has been very long in —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I am sorry; I have no time.

I am prepared to take what was said at face value. Frankly, if we are going to be cynical about every remark made by senior figures in this society, we are not going to get terribly far. However, I understand why people can sometimes be a bit suspicious. We may disagree over the precise detail of where we are going, but that speech has sparked a debate and a sea change in the discussion on education, and that is important.

I am disappointed by the approach of the Ulster Unionists. Again, they come across as talking the talk by saying that they support integration, but every time they are asked to put their hands up to give their full support to a proper integrated system, they baulk at it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Dr Farry: They defend the status quo — segregation. I find that somewhat disappointing. My time is up, so I had better leave it there.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 39; Noes 39.

AYES

Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Callaghan, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Doherty, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Leonard, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McNarry, Mr Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Mr S Anderson, Lord Bannside, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gibson, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Lyttle and Mr McCarthy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report by Oxford Economics, 'Developing the case for shared education'; believes that the current education system is unsustainable; recognises the economic, educational and social benefits that can come from integrated and shared education; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively promote a system of integrated and shared education throughout Northern Ireland.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Greyabbey: Sewerage System

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr McCarthy: I do not think that I will take all the time allotted to me, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I will do my best.

My constituents in Greyabbey are very grateful to the Business Committee for putting this debate on their desperate situation on the Order Paper today. I am also grateful for the support of my Strangford MLA colleagues and to Minister Murphy for attending to hear of the plight of those unfortunate local residents.

Greyabbey is a very pleasant and historic coastal village, halfway down the Ards Peninsula, sitting adjacent to Strangford Lough. The residents quite often refer to it as a forgotten village, despite the best efforts of its elected representatives and a very active community group. Minister Murphy visited the village with me a couple of years ago. At that time, the deplorable condition of the upper end of Main Street in Greyabbey was of paramount importance. Unfortunately, I have to say to Minister Murphy that that is still the position, and nothing has been done. Roads Service continues to wait for Northern Ireland Water (NIW) to carry out work before it can resurface the busy Main Street. Meanwhile, other problems arise at the other end of Main Street, around the local primary school and nearby private properties. There have been very frequent sewage spills, resulting in horrible consequences for many people in that area of Main Street.

About 10 years ago, Greyabbey got a brand new sewerage facility, after a lot of hard work between the Water Service, public representatives and local residents. That facility was hailed as a success. However, in recent times, problems have arisen around The Square and on the Portaferry Road in Greyabbey. The

experience for residents is that, when heavy rain occurs, pipes seem to be unable to cater for the huge volume of water, and, as a result, sewage from the plant backfills and spills out into the street, getting into private homes and, at times, into the local primary school. That cannot be acceptable and must be given priority immediately to prevent further destruction of local people's homes and the school.

It would seem that the problem started back in May of this year, with similar occurrences in July, August, September and October, with the latest occurring a few weeks ago, on 7 November. I have had correspondence with Northern Ireland Water, the Minister and the Consumer Council, all of whom have acknowledged the serious problem. Yet every time there is heavy rainfall, the problem occurs. The occupant of the gate lodge at the Rosemount estate, the people in the primary school and the owners of private homes around the corner from the school and on the Portaferry Road are at their wits' end. I appeal to the Minister to insist that preventative measures are installed immediately.

I have to report to the Assembly the result of what is now called out-of-sewer flooding that occurred on 7 November, as reported by a resident:

"On top of the usual sewage flooding into our inner courtyard, down the lane, across the driveway and also internally into our utility room we now have a worse problem. We have an old church",

which is adjacent to their home,

"which we are beginning to renovate and which currently stores many of our possessions — this is now sitting in a lake of sewage and our possessions are now contaminated with sewage from the village — we are unable to go outside our door without wearing wellies to wade through the appalling effluent."

Mr Deputy Speaker, I have photographs here, but I do not think that I should expose them, because they are absolutely horrific. Surely no one in this society in this day and age should have to endure that from an adjacent sewage plant.

In conclusion, I am heartened and glad to report that on 16 November — last week — Northern Ireland Water installed a non-return valve to the sewerage connection at the property at 1 Portaferry Road. I am assured that that will prevent sewage from flowing back up the connection when the sewers are surcharged and spilling out of the manhole in the residents'

courtyard area. No heavy rain has happened since that was fitted, so we await some form of success with bated breath.

An investigation of the wider sewerage network has been completed in Greyabbey, and a report has been produced to identify the problems that have been encountered. Based on the findings of the report, Northern Ireland Water is developing a solution that will require the upgrading of the sewerage system in the Greyabbey area and the installation of tanks at the local waste water treatment works. It plans to take that work forward within the current financial year. However, that means by the end of March, and we have a long winter in front of us. I appeal to the Minister to complete that work as soon as possible, rather than wait until the end of the financial year. I thank Members and the Minister for their attention.

Mr Hamilton: I congratulate the Member on securing today's Adjournment debate. I have heard some people cruelly say that the Member talks a lot of sewage, and, for the past six minutes, he literally has. However, in this case, it is a very real, important and problematic situation for residents in Greyabbey. Indeed, it is not just in that one part of the Strangford constituency or of the Ards Peninsula; the problem is clearly evident right across the Strangford constituency and right across Northern Ireland, where we and the Minister's Department struggle day in, day out with a legacy of underinvestment in our water and sewerage infrastructure. We see the pressures that have built up with development in our towns and villages and the stress and strain that it is putting on what is, in some cases, a Victorian water and sewerage infrastructure.

I fully support the Member's comments on Greyabbey. With your indulgence and latitude, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will shamelessly exploit this opportunity to raise other similar issues in the Strangford constituency. I do not expect a response from the Minister on those issues today, but I would fail in my duty if I did not avail myself of the opportunity to raise some of them. Other Members in the House who represent the Strangford constituency will know about these problems and will agree that they are every bit as important to the residents in those areas as the issue that Mr McCarthy has highlighted.

I want to raise a handful of issues; I will skip through them as quickly as I can. In my home

town of Comber, there is simply a capacity issue — maybe I should not say “simply” — in the Dermott estate, particularly around the Dermott Green area. Like the residents in Greyabbey, every time there is serious rain, people in that area are waiting to be flooded. As any of us would, they have taken all sorts of measures to protect their properties, and I commend them for that. I also commend Northern Ireland Water and Roads Service for their work on the ground in very difficult circumstances and with, at times, very limited resources. I commend them for their work in the Dermott Green area of Comber, for the practical help and assistance that they have given to residents when there has been flooding, and for the work that they continue to do to try to solve the problem. It is a capacity issue that needs to be addressed in that area or else those poor people will be flooded every time there is the sort of rain that occurred last week, at Halloween or at other parts of this year.

5.30 pm

The Minister will be familiar with the second issue, which involves Killyleagh. For those Members who do not know, sewage is pumped from Crossgar to Killyleagh. The wastewater treatment works in Killyleagh can deal with the capacity, so that is not an issue, but the problem is that an unbearable smell is produced via air vents that are sited on the Downpatrick Road in Killyleagh. My family still lives in the area, so I know of the problem particularly well. The longer-term solution is not air vents, and anything that has been done to try to solve the problem has not worked. Simply, something needs to be done at the Crossgar end to treat the waste there so that there is not the need for pumping to Killyleagh. The problems with the smell on the Downpatrick Road would then stop.

Thirdly and fourthly, I want to raise two separate issues, which, in many respects, are opposite sides of the same coin. One issue has had the effect of stopping development. The other is of too much development.

The first of those refers to Ballynahinch. I thank the Minister for taking up the invitation to visit Ballynahinch and to speak about various issues, which he will do this week. We have discovered that, in Ballynahinch, there is a restriction on planning. I know that planning is not the Minister's responsibility, but it is impacted on by the sewerage system. The Planning Service says

that it will not approve any further development in the town unless the sewerage works are upgraded or unless any development has its own wastewater treatment works. That has been the case elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

That inhibits the ability of Ballynahinch to regenerate. Like many towns across Northern Ireland, it has seen better days, yet, sitting as a gateway to the Mourne, and, as a market town for the past 400 years, it has huge potential. There are many private investors who want to spend a lot of money in Ballynahinch and to start to regenerate the town, and we want to welcome that. However, the ability to do that is impinged upon by the inability to develop, coming from planning regulations, because of the lack of capacity of the sewerage works. There has been a lack of capacity for around a year. The investment strategy for Northern Ireland contains a commitment to upgrade the wastewater treatment works in Ballynahinch over the next number of years, and I urge the Department to do all that it can to ensure that that becomes a reality so that that town can get back on its feet and help itself to regenerate.

Finally, I will raise an issue that relates to Saintfield about which I have pestered the Minister and the Department for the past number of years. I have never seen such a concentration of flooding of such huge proportions in one small area. I will not list the streets, addresses and buildings that it has affected, but it has affected residences and schools and has blocked the Crossgar Road, which is the main road between Belfast and Downpatrick. That entire road was flooded.

There are all sorts of theories on why that has happened, and I think that there is simply a lack of capacity in the system. Unlike Ballynahinch, development continues in that area. When Northern Ireland Water is consulted, it says that there is sufficient capacity in the system. I suspect that there is sufficient capacity overall, but that one little area, centred around the Old Grand Jury Road and Crossgar Road, seems to be inundated. There are factors outside the main system, such as run-off from an adjacent field, which may be having an impact on the system there. Nonetheless, it is having a severe impact on people and on properties in that area.

In seeking to solve all those problems, the entirety of the Minister's capital budget for the remainder of this financial year would

probably be spent. Nevertheless, those four examples underpin and underline Mr McCarthy's basic point, which is that there has been an underinvestment in our water and sewerage systems, and the people across our constituency are suffering as a result.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: I know that the Minister has been active on this issue, but I urge him to do all that he can to help to alleviate the situations that I have outlined.

Mr McNarry: I suspect that my Strangford colleague Kieran McCarthy MLA was bang up to date and undoubtedly in order when he submitted this topic for debate, dualling the sewerage system and private properties in Greyabbey, and I thank him for doing that. However, I can report that Greyabbey people are most grateful that, in their opinion, the complaints about the sewerage system are, to a large extent, being dealt with, although that is not before time. That is, the problems relating to sewerage and the development of private properties are being dealt with.

Wednesday week ago I attended a village hall meeting called by the Greyabbey and District Community Association. The only elected representatives able to attend with me were Councillor Carson and Councillor Boyle, and respective apologies were sent by those who were unable to be there. The subject of sewers and the issue of derelict sites and unfinished developments arose in the discussion.

The purpose of the meeting was to reveal the outcome of a Greyabbey survey. Although I say that sewerage and private developments were discussed, they were, in a sense, secondary items and were not reflected in the survey that had just been taken. That is not intended to diminish Mr McCarthy's Adjournment topic in any way; rather, it is just a report of the latest situation in Greyabbey.

I see this debate as a means to introduce to the Minister and the House the Greyabbey survey, particularly question 4, which asked, "What do you think of the standard of the village's roads?", and question 8, which asked, "If Greyabbey were to receive funding, how would you like the money to be spent?" The answers to those questions revealed the link to the issue of sewers. In response to question 4 on the standard of

roads, it will come as no surprise to the Minister that 21% answered “abysmal”, 30% said “horrendous” and 45% said “awful”. In response to question 8, the greater majority, 43%, said that the money should be spent on improving the roads, especially in Main Street. I do not know whether there is any money going to Greyabbey, but that is a clear message from the people of Greyabbey. If you have any surplus cash, Minister, that is where they would like it spent.

In all cases, the state of the sewerage system running below the roads was identified as being extremely poor. Perhaps “awful” is a better word for the local roads. That is part and parcel of a historical and appalling lack of joined-up thinking between the Planning Service, the Roads Service, NI Water and developers. Indeed, it highlights the serious lack of contact between all those people and those who count most, in my opinion: the Greyabbey villagers.

Greyabbey and District Community Association is to be commended for its initiative in producing its survey. I am sure that the Minister has received a copy of the survey from his officials, because I understand that they, too, were invited to that meeting Wednesday week ago but were unable to attend. However, I am sure that they have familiarised themselves with the survey. I also commend my colleague Kieran McCarthy, who is to be congratulated for bringing this issue to the attention of the House and for allowing us, with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, to broaden the debate a little bit.

Minister, in conclusion, the clear view from Greyabbey is that they want you to prevent any further problems with the sewers. The roads are just lousy, so, please, if you could, would you do your best to sort them for that village? I concur with Kieran that it is, in many respects, a forgotten village, with regard to the roads. Unfortunately, that is a common phrase used about a lot of villages in my constituency of Strangford, which is a constituency of villages.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you, the Minister and my colleagues, because I have been double-booked, and given that this has run on, I have to depart. I am sure that everyone is glad to hear that. I thank the Minister for his attention and Kieran for bringing the topic to the House.

Mr Bell: I, too, congratulate my colleague for bringing the topic to the House, as it is a prescient one for the people of Greyabbey

and the surrounding area. I know that my colleague Kieran will agree that the people of Greyabbey take a real pride in their village. Their homes, regardless of the type of property, are immaculate; they look after their village, for which they must be commended.

I did some research with the office of Jim Shannon, Member of Parliament, in preparation for this debate, and I know that meetings were undertaken directly with residents and that Mr Shannon convened a group meeting with residents and NI Water. Somewhere along the line, Mr Shannon managed to obtain a temporary measure to alleviate some of the immediacy of Greyabbey's sewage problem. It is, therefore, only proper that I put that on the record.

I thank the Minister for taking the time to come here today to deal, not for the first time, with matters that others may not consider to be of magnitude but which my constituents consider very important. The most recent was a traffic-calming measure in West Street. The public in Strangford were pleased that that issue was raised on the Floor and that the Minister took time out of his busy schedule to meet directly about it; that was well received. I therefore put on record my appreciation. It shows the success of Northern Ireland's devolved democracy. People can raise the issues that matter to them and seek representation on them, and although they may not always get an answer immediately, they can go directly to the accountable Minister. That is part of our success.

I will now deal directly with the issue of the sewerage system. Raw sewage has been floating on the streets of Greyabbey, and very small children have had to walk through it on their way to primary school in the past number of days; I think that it was around 7 November. If we were to ask any group of young people what century I was talking about, they would say the Victorian period, and they would think that I was describing a village with no sewerage structure. Sadly, that incident was due to heavy rainfall on or around 7 November, which was out of the ordinary. Such rainfall is difficult to prepare for, but it resulted in raw sewage reappearing on the streets of Greyabbey, around the school, at the corner and back down to the gate-lodge.

My colleague Mr Hamilton hit the nail on the head: we are asking the Minister to do something about that in future; however, we recognise that there has been systemic underinvestment in the

sewerage system in Northern Ireland generally and in Greyabbey specifically. We are, therefore, not in any way taking part in a blame game or trying to score points. Rather, we are telling the Minister that the situation is critical because raw sewage is on the streets. We want a sewerage system that is fit for the twenty-first century not to a time gone by.

Mr Hamilton raised another issue of equal concern to an individual in Ballywalter about 28 Main Street, where the old post office once was. I will confirm the exact details with the Minister, but there seems to be a problem. Whether that problem is with storm drainage, which comes under Roads Service, or with sewage, which comes under Northern Ireland Water, either way, the Minister has the monopoly.

5.45 pm

The problem is at the corner of what was the old post office and yard. Roads Service has looked at that and dealt with the problem by patching it up. However, water continues to come through. Therefore, can we get to the root of the problem in that area? Is it storm water or sewage? Whatever it is, it is still coming through. The area has been marked to be patched again, but I want to ensure that the issue is looked at.

As Mr McNarry slightly inaccurately put it, there was a village meeting in Greyabbey. Unfortunately, I got notification of that at 7.30 pm. Arriving home after duties connected to the House, I was opening my mail — it was probably 7.45 pm or 8.30 pm before I got through it all — and found an invitation to the meeting. However, it was delivered to me on the day of the meeting. I know that colleagues such as Simon Hamilton and others would have been at the meeting but could not do so because they were not invited. However, my colleague Councillor Joe Hagan, who has not been mentioned, and who has done a lot of work in the Greyabbey area, was there. I assure people that through our group meetings, locally and in other places, we will follow up on the feedback from that meeting and on what Greyabbey wants and needs from Roads Service.

In my final minute, I want to raise the issue of the road in Greyabbey, which is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation. Main Street is probably one of the worst roads in any village in Northern Ireland. However, the problem cannot be solved until the sewerage system is dealt with. The situation is such that we are getting

numerous complaints from people who are writing to us and asking us to do something. When one drives down the road — or bounces down it, perhaps — one has to go through the ruts. I have to tell people that nothing can be done about the road until the sewerage system is sorted out, because Roads Service will not work on it until then.

There is a need for some level of joined-up government. I bring that to the Minister's attention and thank him for his presence and interest in these matters.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to be able to come to the Chamber today and respond to the debate tabled by Mr McCarthy. As he will know, I am aware that there are ongoing problems affecting the sewerage system in the Greyabbey area and that out-of-sewer flooding has occurred in the village. I appreciate his frustration and that of other Members with the flooding and with the development of the work needed to resolve the issue once and for all.

Flooding is a very distressful occurrence for businesses and residential properties. However, the involvement of sewage adds enormously to that distress. I very much appreciate the frustration felt by the residents of Greyabbey.

In conjunction with the NIEA (Northern Ireland Environment Agency), NIW has identified a scheme to resolve the problem by upgrading the sewerage system in the village and carrying out improvements to the local waste water treatment works. The sewer from Main Street to the waste water treatment works will be upgraded to prevent a recurrence of the flooding at the rear of the Wildfowler Inn restaurant, and two combined storm water overflows on Main Street will be abandoned. The sewer serving Mill Lane will also be upgraded and new tanks will be installed at the treatment works.

The need to upgrade the sewer serving the Newtownards Road and the Carrowdore Road has also been identified. The scheme is presently at design stage but requires some additional CCTV analysis of the sewerage system to confirm what is anticipated to be a significant infiltration of groundwater into sewers at a number of locations.

I appreciate that people want that scheme to happen yesterday. However, it is important, while

we are developing it, that we do so correctly. That is not to drag things out or drag our heels. A certain amount of silting and groundwater infiltration has been identified at a number of locations. If those things are not fixed as part of the overall scheme, we will store up problems for the future, so it is important to take time to get this right.

It is possible that the CCTV survey will identify the need for additional remedial work to be carried out on the system. However, NIW remains confident that work will commence in the current financial year and will be completed next year. Additional de-silting work has been identified for the sewer lines on Newtownards Road, Main Street and The Square in Greyabbey as part of normal operational activity, and that work will be ongoing.

A number of Members raised issues during the debate, and, if I leave out any detail in my response, I will write to them. Mr Hamilton raised the issue of the sewers in Dermott Drive in Comber. NIW is aware of that issue, and a scheme has been developed to resolve it. He also mentioned Ballynahinch, and NIW has identified a scheme to address the lack of capacity in and around Ballynahinch, which will, hopefully, have an impact on the ability to grant planning approvals.

I am disappointed that there are ongoing problems in Killyleagh. I think that the first site meeting that I was invited to after taking up the position of Minister for Regional Development was at Killyleagh, at the invitation of Jim Shannon. An odour problem was identified. I know that there have been attempts to deal with the problem, and I am disappointed that they have not been successful. I will raise that issue again with NIW, as I will the issue in Saintfield that Mr Hamilton mentioned. I will certainly get back to him on that.

I appreciate that David McNarry had to leave. He spoke about the survey that was carried out by Greyabbey residents. I have not received that survey yet, but I will have a look at it and take into account the feelings of the residents there. I understand that people are frustrated by what they consider to be substandard infrastructure. Members have acknowledged that we are playing catch-up to a substantial degree with our sewerage, water and road infrastructures. Even with restricted budgets, we will try to ensure

that, where possible, we improve infrastructure as we go along.

Jonathan Bell raised issues about Ballywalter, and I will have to get back to him in writing. He also raised the issue of the sewers in Greyabbey Main Street. Obviously, the identification of the solution to the sewage problem has taken some time as there has to be design and analysis of what is required. It would probably be inappropriate or unwise for Roads Service to get involved in a substantial area of work on Main Street while there is a possibility that the street will need to be dug up to accommodate required sewage works. It is always the case that Roads Service will hold back until sewerage work is completed, and the intention is for that work to be started in the next couple of months and finished a couple of months thereafter. I had the opportunity to travel through Greyabbey to see the road surface myself, and I concur that it is not of a standard that people would like to see. I understand that Roads Service would want to hold back until the NIW work is completed, and I anticipate that it will want to revisit that, depending on its budget.

Some would say that those issues are not the biggest in the world, but they are pressing issues for the Strangford constituency and the village of Greyabbey. I am happy to be able to provide some information. I hope that people are satisfied that there is a serious effort ongoing to tackle the situation in Greyabbey and that out-of-sewer flooding is considered a serious issue. We must ensure that we get the right system in place so that we do have to revisit it in a couple of years and have people asking why we did not put the proper system in place when we did the work in the first place. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that all of the studies are carried out. However, there is a sense of urgency on the issue from NIW, and it intends to start the work in the next couple of months. I hope that that gives Members some encouragement. We will come back to the range of other issues in due course.

Adjourned at 5.54 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 29 November 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Resignation of Mr Gerry Adams

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter from Mr Gerry Adams to state that he will resign as a Member of the Assembly with effect from 6 December 2010. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ministerial Statement

Intergovernmental Agreement on Criminal Justice Co-operation

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that he wishes to make a statement to the House.

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on a meeting that I had with Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Justice and Law Reform, under the auspices of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on co-operation on criminal justice matters, in Dublin on Friday 12 November. It was the second formal ministerial meeting under the intergovernmental agreement since the devolution of policing and justice matters on 12 April, although I have met Mr Ahern on a number of occasions since then.

Members will recall my statement to the House in September, following my first meeting under the intergovernmental agreement in July. As I said then, as the agreement is analogous to the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), I am committed to keeping the Assembly informed of meetings held under the auspices of the agreement. The meeting with Dermot Ahern on 12 November was constructive and provided a good opportunity to discuss a number of criminal justice issues of mutual interest. We were updated on a range of cross-border issues, including supporting public protection; management of sex offenders; support for victims of crime; youth justice; forensic science; and promoting social diversity. I also took the opportunity to ask about progress in facilitating lateral entry of police officers between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána.

We discussed the progress of project advisory groups covering the main areas of mutual benefit and noted in particular the good channels

of communication between criminal justice organisations on both sides of the border to ensure that the border is not exploited by criminals to escape justice.

The meeting also provided an opportunity to review the work programme that Dermot Ahern and I agreed in July. I am pleased to report to the House that all the agreed actions remain on course for delivery by next summer.

I am particularly pleased to report that a memorandum of understanding between the forensic science services is at an advanced stage of completion. It has been developed to provide mutual support in the event of sudden loss or damage to facilities and is an excellent example of practical co-operation that will be of benefit to both jurisdictions. Another extremely positive development is a plan to extend the memorandum of understanding to a tripartite agreement to include the Scottish Forensic Science Service. It is pleasing to note that work is also well advanced in that regard.

One of the planned actions to promote co-operation that emanated from the work programme took place immediately prior to my meeting with Dermot Ahern. That was the first annual public protection advisory group seminar, which was held in the Probation Service's offices in Haymarket, Dublin. The theme of the seminar was partnership working for public protection. It brought together representatives from both police services, both prison services and both probation services. Showcasing examples of innovative interventions with offenders, the event provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on current practice in challenging environments, to share information on what works, and to establish positive networks for ongoing collaboration. I was pleased to be present, along with Dermot Ahern, to address the seminar. Building on the success of the event, the second annual public protection advisory group seminar is scheduled to take place next year in Northern Ireland.

Progress against all the actions in the work programme will continue to be monitored by a working group of officials who will report to Dermot Ahern and me at our next ministerial meeting. I will host that meeting, which is planned for March 2011. It is my intention, Mr Speaker, with your continuing agreement, to update the Assembly following that meeting.

Finally, the devolution of policing and justice powers provides a real opportunity to further enhance working relationships between and across the criminal justice agencies. The intergovernmental agreement is an important framework for supporting co-operation between criminal justice organisations on both sides of the border.

I am concerned to make the most of opportunities, be they North/South, east-west or international, to work in partnership where that makes sense. Therefore, Members may be interested to note that Dermot Ahern and I met Kenny MacAskill MSP, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice, on 27 September, to discuss matters of common interest, including human trafficking, across the three jurisdictions. The three jurisdictions share many common issues. Therefore, it is important that we maintain ongoing contact to collectively make our community safer.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice (Lord Morrow):

I note from the Minister's statement that he discussed the issue of human trafficking with Dermot Ahern and Kenny MacAskill on 27 September. Can he provide more details on the scale of the problem across the three jurisdictions? What actions and initiatives have been agreed to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice speedily and successfully? Also, have any further discussions on that issue taken place with his relevant counterparts in England and Wales to ensure the same level of co-operation?

Turning to the range of cross-border issues that were discussed at the meeting on 12 November, I ask the Minister to provide further information on the discussions that took place on two issues that the Committee for Justice has paid particular attention to, namely support for victims of crime and the management of sex offenders. Are any new initiatives planned in those areas?

I will now speak as a representative of a border constituency, rather than as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice. I am disappointed that the statement makes no mention whatsoever of any new initiative to tackle the dissident threat that seems to be escalating virtually on a daily basis. Will the Minister assure us that he is concerned about the escalation of that threat and that his Department will take all and any new initiatives that need to be taken to curtail it?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Committee Chairperson for his early comments around some of the issues that were covered. I will try to deal with his final point later. He asked about successes and initiatives regarding trafficking. During the past year, Members will recall that 25 victims of human trafficking were recovered in Northern Ireland, and a number of prosecutions are pending.

There was also the much-publicised trial recently of a family from Wales who had been involved in trafficking in different jurisdictions in the UK. There is absolutely no doubt that our agencies are co-operating fully with other agencies in Scotland, Wales, England and the South. In particular, UK Border Agency officials, who, of course, do not report directly to the Department of Justice, are working with the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) to look at illegal immigration that exploits the common travel area. Recently, there have been significant successes.

In the immediate future, we hope to relaunch the Blue Blindfold campaign, which aims to raise awareness of trafficking issues in order to ensure that the public and relevant agencies respond. I hope that we will relaunch that campaign in early 2011 in conjunction with the similar campaign run by the Irish Department of Justice and Law Reform.

The Chairperson asked for details of meetings with officials in England and Wales in the time that is covered by the statement. I have not had any direct, face-to-face meetings with Home Office or Ministry of Justice Ministers. However, my officials have been engaged with them in a series of ongoing meetings on co-ordination.

Lord Morrow also raised the issue of victims of crime. As Chairperson of the Committee for Justice, he will know that the Justice Bill contains detailed references to promote victims' interests. Indeed, the public protection seminar that took place in Dublin touched on that issue, as well as the management of sex offenders. Therefore, initiatives are coming forward. We are learning from our neighbouring jurisdictions, wherever they are in these islands, about how to work together better.

Finally, Lord Morrow referred to what he described as the "growing dissident threat". Of course, we are all aware of it. However, the intergovernmental agreement has a specific focus, which is not related to terrorism. I can assure him that I receive regular briefings from

the Chief Constable. I have also had recent meetings with the Garda Commissioner. I am assured that co-operation is at the highest level. There have been significant successes, from the PSNI's perspective and that of the Garda Síochána, in dealing with people who reject the peace process and the settlement that the vast majority of people on the island has accepted.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Chairperson's comments on so-called dissidents bring to mind those that Mr Robinson made at the weekend, when he said that although their agenda will not win, we must not let them set our agenda. At all times, we must attempt to move on.

I welcome the Minister's statement. He mentioned the recent cross-border public protection advisory group seminar, which he said showcased examples of innovative interventions with offenders. He went on to talk about sharing information on what works. Can he enlighten the House as to what the group believes does work and what examples will be further investigated and, indeed, promoted?

The Minister of Justice: I believe that Mr O'Dowd is trying to catch me out on what inevitably happens on such occasions: Ministers turn up for a small part of a detailed seminar. I expect to receive a report soon from the two probation services, which led the seminar, on the details of work that was done. If the Member wishes, I will happily supply it to him.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his helpful statement. I want to follow up on the point that Lord Morrow made on the dissident threat. The Minister indicated that terrorism and the terrorist threat effectively are not covered by the intergovernmental agreement on co-operation. As an Irish Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, does the Minister not think it ridiculous that he cannot speak to another Irish Minister about the greatest threat that affects both jurisdictions in Ireland, which is the threat from the dissident republican movement? Will he try to amend the intergovernmental agreement so that such a sensitive and important area is covered?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Maginness for his question. Clearly, he makes a valid point. All that I can say is that the agreement, as I inherited it, set up advisory groups to cover issues such as public protection, management of offenders, victims' support, youth justice,

forensic science, and criminal justice and social diversity. We are looking at how to co-ordinate long-term strategic planning between both jurisdictions on all those issues.

12.15 pm

The operational response to the small number of people who continue to carry out acts of terrorism requires a slightly different approach, and I assure the Member that that approach is being taken. I require no permission from anybody to discuss the joint activities of the PSNI and the Garda Síochána with Dermot Ahern, and I happily and frequently do so, whether face to face or by telephone. The House can remain assured that those issues are not being ignored merely because they are not covered by the particular working mechanisms of the IGA.

Dr Farry: Does the Minister see the potential for extending the approach of the forensic science memorandum of understanding to other areas of the criminal justice system? Also, in relation to partnership working for public protection, and noting that he is very active in discussions with his Scottish counterpart, does the Minister see scope for extending those discussions to consider the models being used in Scotland, which are actually innovative and progressive?

Mr McDevitt: *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of Justice: I am astounded that someone near me seems to be suggesting that we should not be discussing issues on a wider basis. When finalised, the forensic science memorandum of understanding will, we hope, cover the full range of potential co-operation to ensure that, in the face of any particular difficulties for forensic science services on either side of the border, full support and assistance can be given in carrying out necessary and urgent functions in the other jurisdiction. Indeed, if that is extended to include the Scottish system, it could work there as well. At the moment, the service in England and Wales seems to be going down a different route, which will make co-operation more difficult than with either Scotland or Ireland in that respect.

There is no doubt that, as we seek to promote partnerships for public protection, we need to learn from good work that is being done in any other neighbouring jurisdiction. For example, as I have had the pleasure of highlighting in

the Assembly before, we are probably to some extent seen as being in the forefront of good work on youth justice. However, there is no doubt that we also have lessons to learn from the youth conferencing work done in Scotland. I am interested in learning lessons from any jurisdiction to be applied for the best purposes for the people of Northern Ireland, and I do not care what particular jurisdiction that may come from.

Lord Browne: I have some concern about the way that decisions on cross-border criminal justice co-operation are taking place. At present, the Minister is meeting Ministers from the Republic and Scotland, Ministers from the UK Government are meeting independently with Ministers from the Republic and, indeed, the European Union is making its own regulations on cross-border co-operation on criminal matters. Will the Minister tell us what he is doing to make sure that all those meetings and negotiations are not simply a large duplication of work? How does he intend to integrate the findings from that large series of meetings?

The Minister of Justice: Lord Browne has a point about the dangers of the multiplicity of meetings. In the IGA, specific roles and responsibilities are being carried through. I have already told the House how we have sought to increase co-ordination with our Scottish colleagues, and I assure the House that initiatives from the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, as they apply to England and Wales, are also kept under review. Although there may be a variety of meetings happening, there is full co-ordination of approach, learning lessons, applying them as best may be within the individual jurisdictions and seeing that, collectively, we make all the communities of these islands safer places.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he give us some more insight into human trafficking? He mentioned that 25 families have been affected by the human trafficking industry, as it relates to drugs and the sex trade. What happens to people who have been rescued and who are too afraid to become witnesses? Are they automatically deported? Are there lessons that we can learn across the island on that issue?

The Minister of Justice: Ms Ní Chuilín makes a valid point about the way in which we handle victims of trafficking. It is clearly an issue

when people are found by police or other public agencies in an area that they are not familiar with, and they may well be extremely fearful of telling their story honestly and openly.

Those responsible for the care of victims recovered from trafficking do their best to encourage them to give evidence and to ensure that traffickers are dealt with and victims are not doubly victimised. Ultimately, if illegal immigrants are involved, the UK Border Agency has roles and responsibilities, as opposed to Department of Justice agencies. I am concerned that our agencies respond as sensitively and constructively as possible to those who are victims of this dreadful crime.

Mr Buchanan: I thank our British Justice Minister for his statement. Some people would try to divert that fact. I agree that we should have co-operation with our neighbours in the Irish Republic when it is in our mutual interest. However, it also important to develop close links with other UK jurisdictions. I welcome the meetings that the Minister had with the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice. I am disappointed that he has not yet met his counterparts in England and Wales.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to ask his question.

Mr Buchanan: Will the Minister inform the House when he intends to meet them? Will he also inform us why he felt that the dissident republican threat was not of significant enough importance to discuss at the meeting?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Buchanan for the question. I am happy to stand here as the Minister of Justice for Northern Ireland elected by the Members of this Assembly. If that means that I have responsibilities on an all-Ireland basis in partnership, I am happy with those. If it means that I have responsibilities in the United Kingdom in partnership, I am happy with those. If Members wish to start twisting those points, they can. It will not put me off doing the job that I am elected to do.

Mr Buchanan talked about links with other UK jurisdictions. I expect, within the next couple of weeks, to attend a meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) to show the importance of east-west as well as North/South links. I made the statement today because the operation of the IGA is analogous to that of the NSMC. Previously in the House, I mentioned meetings

that I had with the Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor on a visit to London. This morning, I referred to ongoing contact with officials, and those will continue. Today's formal statement was made because of the architecture of the co-operation. Such co-operation continues with all other jurisdictions.

Mr McDevitt: I assure the Minister that we are very happy to see a Northern Ireland Minister speaking with a Republic of Ireland Minister on issues of concern to the island of Ireland.

Why was there no mention in the statement of cross-border organised crime, such as diesel smuggling, car theft, and other stuff that we see reported often in the newspapers? Such activities are of significant concern to many of us in this House and in Dáil Éireann. Why has the Minister come to the House unable to provide us with details of conversations that he may have had on those topics with the Minister in the Republic?

The Minister of Justice: I should explain to Mr McDevitt that not every topic that is the subject of every working group is mentioned at every meeting between two Ministers. I assure him that work by, for example, the cross-border fuel fraud enforcement group continues, but such work was not discussed at any great length at this particular meeting and, therefore, was not reported.

I could also have reported on the annual cross-border crime seminar, which we hosted on 4 October, the aim of which is to strengthen the partnerships with different agencies, North and South, and to look at organised crime in general. Not every meeting discusses everything, but that does not mean that the work is not ongoing. If any Member has particular concerns about the level of co-operation with any adjacent jurisdiction, I will be happy to provide them with private answers.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister mentioned facilitating lateral entry of police officers between PSNI and an Garda. What answers did he get on that issue? Will the Minister bear in mind that pay and conditions and the pension regulations of the two police services are totally different and there are major anomalies? Will the Minister also bear in mind that those pay and conditions and pension regulations are replicated for the entire British police service?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Spratt for making the point, but we have had the option of lateral entry between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána for a number of years. As he correctly highlighted, one of the principle deterrents is the portability of pensions. It is not a blockage, but it is clearly a deterrent. The way that pensions are structured goes beyond police services across the UK. It is almost an issue for the entire public sector across the UK.

Shortly after the Good Friday Agreement, efforts were made to resolve some of these issues, but those efforts came to nothing. The issue has also been raised at EU level and has come to nothing, so I am not sure that I could have been expected to resolve it in seven months in the Department of Justice. I am keen to see short-term movements between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána. There have been some success stories, which is to be welcomed. Those movements inform officers of the work of the other authority and improve relationships. However, we have to look on a wider scale, and it is a bit beyond my capabilities to resolve the pensions issue in particular.

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

Mr Callaghan: Will the Minister expand on the discussions at the meeting around promoting social diversity?

The Minister of Justice: I suspect that I would be expanding on something that was a relatively short part of the meeting, but it is clear that there are significant issues regarding the work of criminal justice agencies, North and South, as they cope with an increasingly diverse society. It is important to ensure that all agencies that work with us are aware of differences and changes happening in society, North and South, and that they recognise that methods that worked some years ago do not always work in handling the needs of our communities these days. It is vital that every agency recognises that, and I am pleased to see that it is being addressed at a serious level. Again, if the Member wants a fully detailed report of that particular work stream, I will see that he gets it.

Ms Lo: I am pleased to hear the Minister say that there will be a relaunch of the Blue Blindfold campaign. The Minister may be aware that I helped Minister Paul Goggins to launch the first campaign, but I must say that it was not very effective. It was not very visible, and, if you ask the public —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please ask a question, Ms Lo.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister assure the Assembly that the campaign will be much more effective this time around, and that it will have a much higher profile, perhaps involving the other jurisdictions that he has mentioned?

The Minister of Justice: I thank my colleague for her question, and for highlighting that she helped to launch the campaign with a seminar in February 2010, when approximately 120 front line staff from a range of agencies listened to a variety of speakers on the issue to ensure that we got across the seriousness of the crime of human trafficking. I believe that the campaign ran only for a few weeks. It ran for five or six weeks in Northern Ireland and similar lengths of time in other jurisdictions. Perhaps it is difficult to establish in its early stages. That is why I am determined to see that we continue to run the campaign on a reasonably regular basis. If we do that in conjunction with neighbouring jurisdictions, it will help to maximise the impact of the work that Ms Lo kicked off earlier in the year.

Mr McNarry: Minister, bearing in mind the current financial crisis facing the Republic of Ireland, did the matter of continuing the financing of cross-border activity by the guards arise in your discussions over a cup of coffee or wherever? Do you have any concerns about the ability of the South to continue to fund its responsibilities, particularly in, around and on the border?

The Minister of Justice: I assure the Member that we were not specifically discussing the financial crisis affecting the Republic, although it was the subject of questions to Dermot Ahern from the local media prior to our meeting. I was assured at that meeting and on other occasions that the Garda Síochána remains fully committed to providing a proper policing service up to the border and to working in the closest possible co-operation across the border with the PSNI.

There is, in fact, some suggestion that the current Garda Commissioner has provided more resources to deal with the cross-border terrorist threat than would be appreciated by some people in particular towns in the South that are experiencing spates of criminal violence. I have no doubt that there is the best possible North/

South co-operation, and there is every sign that that will be maintained.

12.30 pm

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. There are those who have difficulty with our Ministers co-operating or collaborating with one another on issues that affect the whole island. To them, I say that such co-operation is very much a part of the essential progress of the Good Friday Agreement and, indeed, of the future stability of that agreement.

The Minister said that communication between the criminal justice organisations was important in impacting on criminals on both sides of the border. It was mentioned earlier, in relation to drugs, alcohol, illegal oil and fuel smuggling and so on, that those illegal organisations depend largely on those activities for their survival. That applies to all the organisations mentioned here this morning.

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his comments. As I said, I am happy to co-operate with people in any other jurisdiction on these islands or anywhere else to provide stability for this society and to help to provide a safer shared community for all of us. There is no doubt that there are those who are engaged in criminal activity that is directly linked to the funding of terrorist activity. In that sense, the work to deal with, for example, tobacco smuggling, fuel laundering and even illegal dumping may be related to the fight against terrorism. That is why it is so important, without talking specifically about terrorism in every sentence, for that kind of co-operation to continue.

Mr Givan: The Minister referred to the memorandum of understanding between the forensic science services. Is the momentum for achieving that memorandum based on a concern that our forensic science service unit is a specific target of republican paramilitaries? Given the concern that the organisation has insufficient technical capability because of a reduction of resources over the past number of years, will he assure the House that he is making every effort to ensure the necessary capability to tackle the existing threat?

The Minister of Justice: I assure the Member that the memorandum of understanding is not linked to any specific threat; it is a simple

matter of practicality. Sometimes, problems in laboratories mean that work there cannot be continued for a period. Therefore, a memorandum that shares work with one or two neighbouring jurisdictions appears to make practical common sense.

The Member also referred to the technical capability of Forensic Science Northern Ireland. On the visit that I paid it some weeks ago, I was assured that it had the necessary technical capability. Indeed, it kept up that capability at a time when it may have been suggested that it was not required. It is dealing resolutely with all kinds of criminal and terrorist activity.

Executive Committee Business

Commissioner for Older People Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on junior Minister Mr Gerry Kelly to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Commissioner for Older People Bill.

Moved. — [The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been selected, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Commissioner for Older People Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

General Register Office (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel
(Mr S Wilson):** I beg to move

That the draft General Register Office (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

The Order that comes under Members' consideration today is intended to provide revised fees for the certificates, change of name services and the marriage and civil partnership preliminaries and formalities that are charged by the General Register Office. The Order also includes a proposed date for the commencement of the new fees. The last fees Order was made in 2008. The new Order proposes fees that reflect the increased costs of providing those public services.

Members will wish to know that, under the current law, fees are not charged for the statutory requirement of registering births and deaths or for providing one copy of a birth entry at the time of registration. However, fees are chargeable for the provision of other certificates and for further certified copies of registration events, including, when necessary, the searching of indexes and the retrieval of the record involved. Fees are also chargeable for carrying out procedures such as recording a name change and for marriage and civil partnership services, including the giving of notice, the solemnisation of marriages and the registration of civil partnerships. Under government accounting rules, the cost of such chargeable services is recovered by means of a fees Order, as provided for in the relevant legislation. It is in that context that the Order comes before the Assembly.

The General Register Office (GRO) and district registration offices produce more than 16,000 certified copies of vital events for which fees are chargeable each year. The production of certificates requires significant administrative input, involving receiving moneys; searching indexes; producing copies on security paper; certification; and dispatch. In the past year, GRO efficiency in those processes has improved because of the ongoing digitisation project, which is in the process of digitising all paper records from 1845 to date. The availability of digitised records has improved the speed of service, the accuracy of data provided and the quality of documents. The introduction of enhanced indexes provides not only more

information than previously for members of staff and the public but a more efficient service.

Over the years, by introducing new services, the General Register Office has significantly improved options for the delivery of registration services. The public can order certificates from any location in the world, either over the Internet or by telephone, and pay for services using credit cards. Improvements have also been made in the General Register Office public search room by providing a more spacious environment, upgrading IT equipment and trebling the number of terminals. In recognition of that and other developments, the General Register Office recently achieved reaccreditation of its customer service excellence status, the successor to the Charter Mark, which the office held for many years.

To develop the service still further, I will bring forward legislative measures through the Civil Registration Bill to provide greater choice and more flexibility in registering vital events; to determine where they may be registered; to provide additional types of certificates to meet public demand; to enable the sharing of registration information with other Departments; and to provide greater access to the historic civil registration records to facilitate genealogical enquiry.

As I said, the General Register Office is required to recover the costs of chargeable services, including the services provided by local registration offices based in each district council. The previous Order was issued in 2008, and increases are now necessary. Fees have been calculated individually, using work study analysis to reflect the work involved in each area, and they include the full range of costs involved, including staffing, rent, rates and computer maintenance in GRO and district registration offices. A similar cost recovery system operates in Scotland, England and Wales.

Passing the Order will ensure, as has been the case here and in GB, that the cost of providing services and producing chargeable certificates will be borne by parties requiring such services and not by the public purse, which would otherwise be the case. Members will wish to note that, at the new levels, fees for certificates issued from the General Register Office in Northern Ireland are comparable to corresponding fees for certificates issued in Scotland.

Although fees for certificates in England and Wales are lower than those in Northern Ireland, there is no reduction in England and Wales for additional copies of the same certificate that are often required. In addition, certificate processing takes less time in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom, which results in the public receiving a speedier service but, of course, involves higher costs.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the Order, and no objections were raised. Therefore, I commend the Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister has explained, the draft General Register Office (Fees) Order 2010 sets the fees to recover the costs of various services connected with the registration of births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the policy proposals contained in the statutory rule on 29 September 2010 and sought further clarification on two issues. The Committee wrote to the Department of Finance and Personnel seeking clarification on why there was no uplift in fees in 2009 and on how the costs of providing those services are calculated. DFP advised the Committee that, in accordance with financial guidelines, the General Register Office is required to review fees annually to ensure that the cost of providing chargeable public services is recovered. DFP further informed the Committee that, on the basis of the outcome of the fees review in 2009, it was not considered necessary to raise the fees, as full cost recovery for those services had been achieved. On the issue of the assessment of costs, the Committee was advised that fees are set to recoup identifiable costs with no element of profit and that costs are calculated separately for each chargeable service to reflect the work involved in each area. Those include staff costs, rent, rates, maintenance and computer support.

Having received that clarification and on the basis that no further issues were raised by the Examiner of Statutory Rules by way of technical scrutiny, the Committee agreed on 17 November 2010 to support the Department in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the Order. Therefore, I support the motion.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am glad that I got an easy ride this morning, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought that there might have been some issues. However, I thank Members for giving me an easy time on this measure and the Committee for the work that has been done. The fact that officials were able to reassure the Committee that the increase in fees was totally justified and only reflected increased costs to the General Register Office and were able to explain where those costs arose was undoubtedly the reason why no issues have been raised today. I am pleased to commend the motion, and I ask Members to approve the draft General Register Office (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 and that it should come into operation on 1 January 2011.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft General Register Office (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

Committee Business

Standing Orders

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the next three motions relate to amendments to Standing Orders, I propose to conduct the debate as follows. I propose to group motions (a), (b) and (c) as detailed in the Order Paper and conduct only one debate. I shall ask the Clerk to read motion (a), after which I will call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move that motion. Debate will then take place on all three motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on motion (a). I shall then ask the Chairperson to move formally motion (b) and motion (c) in turn, and I will put the Question on each of those motions without further debate. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Browne): I beg to move

In Standing Order 20(1)(b) line 1, leave out "2.30 pm and 3.30 pm" and insert "2.00 pm and 3.00 pm".

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

In Standing Order 20(8), at the end insert

"A supplementary question may contain no more than one enquiry." — [The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Browne).]

In Standing Order 20, after paragraph (8) insert

"(8A) Answers (including those to supplementary questions) may be no longer than two minutes. This period may be extended at the discretion of the Speaker." — [The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Browne).]

12.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee on

Procedures: Members may remember that, in the previous session, an extra slot was added to Question Time on Tuesdays so that it would run from 2.30 pm to 3.30 pm. At that stage, that time was chosen primarily because 'Stormont Live', which covered Question Time, was going out live at that time. As Members know, the programme now goes out at night.

Members of the Committee on Procedures were always aware that 2.30 pm to 3.30 pm was not ideal because of the disruption it would cause to business, and so it has turned out. Items of business have had to be interrupted at 12.30 pm for the lunchtime suspension

to allow the Business Committee to meet. After that, business resumes for only half an hour before it has to be interrupted again for Question Time. Obviously, that is not an efficient way to run business and not a good way to use Members' and Ministers' time. The Committee on Procedures looked at various options for the scheduling of Question Time on Tuesdays and decided that 2.00 pm to 3.00 pm is the best option, as business would be disrupted only once. That timing would have the added benefit of encouraging Members to come to the Chamber after the lunchtime suspension.

The other two motions in the Order Paper relate to how business will be conducted during Question Time. Members have often commented on the length of some Ministers' responses. Long answers and, indeed, long supplementary questions contribute to a lack of spontaneity during Question Time. The Committee on Procedures considered various time limits, and it was agreed that up to two minutes for all answers from Ministers during Question Time seemed reasonable.

The Committee recognised that there could occasionally be times when a longer answer would be necessary if, for example, a matter is of public importance or concerns a sensitive or complex issue. The Speaker has, therefore, been given discretion to allow extra time if he agrees to a request from the relevant Minister. The Speaker will rule on the practicalities of that, but it is not expected that such requests will be frequent, as, in most cases, two minutes should be adequate to allow Ministers to make their key points. Any details, such as statistics, that a Member has requested can either be sent to the Member directly or placed in the Library. I should point out that the two-minute limit applies only to responses at Question Time and does not apply to answers to questions for urgent oral answer or to responses to questions on ministerial statements.

When considering the time limit on Ministers, the Committee thought it only fair that some limits should be placed on supplementary questions. The Speaker and Deputy Speakers frequently tell Members to come to their questions and often say to Ministers that they may answer one, none or all of a Member's questions. The Committee agreed that Members should be restricted to only one supplementary question. Therefore, it will be necessary for all of us to be much more focused and to cut down

on preambles, so that the Speaker and Deputy Speakers can be clear that only one question has been asked.

I hope that we will now have a more focused and challenging Question Time that is of greater value to the House. I commend the motions.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motions have a common-sense element and will tidy up business by cutting out interruptions to the flow of debate. That is entirely commonsensical and should be done. The Member who spoke previously referred to other matters, and the issue of one enquiry is constant in the House. We are all guilty of trying to make a second or third enquiry. That should be tightened up from the point of view of Members and Ministers. We support the motions and feel that they are common-sense measures to tidy up business in the House.

Mr K Robinson: I support the motions, and the Ulster Unionist Party's support will follow. As Lord Browne said, the proposal was made following several complaints from Members about the way in which Question Time has been falling away as a central focus for the Assembly.

As was stated, we made the original changes following discussions with the media to enable them better to follow the processes in the House. However, as was mentioned previously, the media's approach to covering the work at Stormont has changed, and we now have the flexibility better to address the internal workings of the House, particularly on a Tuesday.

The proposal strikes a balance between the need for Ministers to give fairly comprehensive responses and the need not to allow them to head off on a variety of tangents, as some Ministers, unfortunately, are wont to do. Often, those tangents are not connected with the original question, so the insertion of Standing Order 8A will help that process.

As a poacher turned gamekeeper, I think that Members also have a role to play in the supplementary question process. I support the amendment that will ensure that Members put one clearly identified question, either as the original supplementary to the main question or as the follow-up supplementary that is open to other Members. The overall aim is to improve the relevance of Question Time for Ministers, Members and the public, who watch the House's processes with great interest.

Respectfully, Mr Deputy Speaker, I remind you, the other Deputy Speakers and the Speaker that, sometimes, it is perhaps incumbent on the Chair to encourage brevity. We have given flexibility to the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, should they think it in the interests of the House to have a more full and comprehensive answer, to allow Ministers to expand their responses beyond the two minutes. Also, if the Speaker or Deputy Speaker feels that a Member is straying or being more verbose than necessary, he can indicate his displeasure.

Finally, I thank the Committee Clerk for her patience and guidance, which have allowed us to table the three amendments. I support the amendments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Robinson, I wish that you had raised that point earlier, because I would have stopped you earlier.

Lord Morrow: I am in general agreement with Ken Robinson, although that is, perhaps, a dangerous thing to say. The motion is a progressive step. Question Time should be the highlight of the day in the House. We all know that, often, it is not, and I suspect that Members are often to blame. However, the MLAs are not always entirely to blame; sometimes, Ministers go on for three, four or five foolscap pages when much less would do.

That said, we were under the illusion that the Speaker and Deputy Speakers could not do anything about that. Often, we have heard Members being called to order and told that they should get on with putting their question or that they have used their time. We never hear that being said to Ministers, but they also go on a bit. If the proposals are played out to the letter, they will bring about considerable change, and the House will be better for it. Debate will be enhanced, as, I suspect, Mr Deputy Speaker, will your ability to bring to heel Members and Ministers who abuse Question Time. If I am abusing it now, I should sit down.

The Chairperson of the Committee on

Procedures: I thank all Members who contributed to this short and succinct debate, and I am sure that we all look forward to our new, lively and somewhat challenging Question Time, from which we will all benefit.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 20(1)(b) line 1, leave out "2.30 pm and 3.30 pm" and insert "2.00 pm and 3.00 pm".

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 20(8), at the end insert

"A supplementary question may contain no more than one enquiry." — [The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Browne).]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 20, after paragraph (8) insert

"(8A) Answers (including those to supplementary questions) may be no longer than two minutes. This period may be extended at the discretion of the Speaker." — [The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Browne).]

Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010: Prayer of Annulment

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 (S.R. 2010/361) be annulled. — [The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mrs D Kelly).]

Motion not moved.

Private Members' Business

Driving: Drink and Drugs

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

Mr Kinahan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that December is a month that traditionally sees the highest number of road deaths; acknowledges the efforts of the PSNI in detecting drivers who drink and drive, or take drugs and drive; endorses the message that driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs is unacceptable; and urges all drivers to have due regard for the law and to drive responsibly.

I am sure that every Member here supports this incredibly important and timely motion, and I thank them for that. If Members look at the motion, they will see that it places emphasis on the month of December when, sadly, the highest number of road deaths occurs in Northern Ireland. My party, therefore, felt that it was right to table the motion before December, so that all of us can help to raise awareness. The motion states that driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol is totally unacceptable. I know that every Member supports that. The motion also praises the PSNI for all its hard work and campaigns. Indeed, the Minister and many others have also helped give to more weight to the campaign.

I thank the Research and Library Service for its paper. The statistics show that, despite the campaign, accidents have actually increased in the past few years, although deaths and fatalities are down this year. So far this year, there have been 51 road deaths. In comparison, there were 100 deaths up to the same period last year. The campaign has seen a 24% reduction in detections in 2008-09 and a 13% reduction in 2009-2010. However, as all Members know, we can make statistics say what we want them to say. What matters is that we do not want one road death, one family bereaved or one friend lost. We do not want people to suffer severe injuries or, in fact, any injuries at all, and we do not want the life of a family to change in order to adapt to the injury of a loved one.

1.00 pm

The same statistics state in more detail that in 2009-2010 alcohol or drugs accounted for 369 injury collisions, 23 deaths, 120 serious injuries and 439 people being slightly injured. We tabled today's motion to raise awareness and to try to put the issue in the public domain.

Some of my friends may be startled that I tabled such a motion. I grew up in the world of "one for the road", in which people felt that they could drink and drive. That changed to one, two or three drinks for the road if one had eaten, then to one drink, and then, quite rightly, to today's situation in which nothing should be drunk before driving.

Others will have heard my comments on the ghastly adverts on television. Members may remember an advert with a little child in his yellow shirt playing in the garden and a car that comes spinning over a hedge; or an advert with the ghastly comment that the person in the back seat killed his sister by being catapulted forward. Many other people also loathe those ads. However, they work extremely well, even if people turn to another channel as soon as they start. We are here today to support that campaign.

Mr I McCrea: The Member rightly said that those advertisements are effective but, at times, gruesome. Does he agree that it is important that there are advertisements that deal with the emotive issue of deaths on the road due to drink and other issues and that also deal with the effect that drinking or taking drugs and driving has on families?

Mr Kinahan: I agree entirely. As I said, my friends will be startled that I am speaking about this topic because they know that I loathe those ads. However, the ads are effective. Subject to expense, we need more advertisements that do exactly as the Member said, which is to bring forward the awful human effects of drinking or taking drugs and driving. Sometimes, when such ads are aired, people simply think, here we go again. However, I congratulate all the people behind those ads.

As I said, I am not trying to be holier-than-thou. I am asking not only everyone in the House but every parent, youth, friend and neighbour to take the issue on board. Throughout December and the coming months, should any of us see someone who has had a drink getting into his or

her car, it is the responsibility of all of us to help to prevent him or her driving.

The statistics show that convictions are highest for those who are between the ages of 17 and 24. However, I see many young people who behave much better than my generation, are safe drivers and do not drink and drive. I praise those young people just as much as I plead with those who drink and drive not to do so.

I will move on to the second aspect of the motion: driving under the influence of drugs. I am not going to give Members a Clinton moment and say whether or not I took any drugs in the past.

Mr McCallister: Did you inhale?

Mr Kinahan: Or whether I inhaled. However, I will say that I have never heard of half the drugs that were mentioned in the paper.

We are currently missing the point, and it is good that the PSNI is now moving on the issue. People are taking drugs and driving, but the PSNI is now more ready to catch such people, and the punishments are much higher. We need to get that message across.

Again, I ask that friends, parents, colleagues and neighbours get involved and stop those who are taking drugs or who should not be driving. I also ask those who take prescription drugs to seek the advice of their doctor and to read what is written on the box before driving. I am sure that many of us have taken something when we have felt ill and did not know whether we should be driving as a result. We all need to be aware.

I am a father with a daughter who is just about to start to learn to drive, and, like many others, I am concerned about what happens on the roads. I add that people who are too tired, wired or angry should also not be driving, even though that is not in the motion. There are many other times when we should not drive, and I ask everyone to take care this December. I congratulate Superintendent Muir Clarke and the rest of the PSNI yet again for all their hard work. Let us have a December preferably with no road deaths, but certainly with less.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment and as road safety spokesperson for my party.

I commend the Members who brought the motion to the House, because the issue is timely as we approach the festive season. The issue is also one that the Committee for the Environment has taken a great interest in over the past few months, having undertaken in-depth scrutiny of the consultation on the road safety strategy 2010-2020. In its response to that consultation, the Committee welcomed the proposal to lower the blood:alcohol limit from 80 mg to 50 mg. The Committee wants to see the introduction of legislation to that effect as soon as possible. However, there were concerns about the accuracy of the equipment that the PSNI uses to detect the lower limit, and some Committee members felt that there may be merit in retaining samples from blood and urine tests until the equipment's accuracy is confirmed.

The Committee also recommended incentive schemes to be run by pubs in rural areas, such as the provision of a minibus to take customers home. It also recommended the development of a rural transport strategy and the introduction of random breath-testing in the North. However, some Committee members felt that any lack of community confidence must be recognised and addressed before random breath-testing be introduced.

On the issue of drug-driving, Committee members were keen to see research continue into the development of devices that detect impairing drugs, and they felt that that should be a top priority. Committee members also thought that the introduction of an offence of driving with illegal drugs in the body may be a useful interim measure until technology that is aimed at detecting impairing drugs is proven. There is no doubt that taking drugs impairs driving skills. Drivers under the influence of drugs can suffer from slower reaction times, erratic and aggressive behaviour, and an inability to concentrate properly. Hallucinations, panic attacks, paranoia, dizziness and fatigue are all associated with taking drugs, and those are not the types of condition that we would want someone behind the wheel of a car to be in.

Research from 2008 undertaken by the Campaign Against Drinking and Driving (CADD) into road deaths and injuries suggests that one in six road deaths are caused by drivers who are over the legal alcohol limit, and that a similar number of deaths are caused by drug-drivers. Research has also shown that any

amount of alcohol affects a person's ability to drive. There is no foolproof way in which to drink and stay under the limit or to know how much an individual can drink and then drive safely. Therefore, we must get the message across that even one drink is one too many. We must aim to stamp out those abhorrent practices.

Recent initiatives, such as the one run by the licensed retail trade that offered free soft drinks to a nominated driver, are to be welcomed and encouraged. Throughout its consideration of the road safety strategy, the Committee urged the use of incentives to encourage better behaviour, as well as punishment for bad driving.

As the road safety spokesperson for Sinn Féin, I know that we are all very aware of the devastating impact that the loss of a loved one has on the family and the community, but that impact is much greater when the loss of life could have been avoided. Although there is no good time to experience loss owing to a road traffic collision, Christmas can be a particularly difficult time, as the festive period each year serves as a constant reminder to those left behind. Speed, drink and drugs, and inattention — the three key areas in the research papers — are the main causes of fatalities and major injuries, and we all know that the consequences do not stop there.

Families are left devastated and endure many years of grief. People who are seriously injured can endure a lifetime of care and a complete change in their family circumstances. Therefore, the message from the Assembly should be that people should slow down, pay attention and not drive under the influence of drink and drugs.

I pay a special tribute to all the emergency services, which are on the front line in the immediate aftermath of such collisions and have to deal with what can only be described in many cases as carnage. I hope that when the Assembly sits down to agree a Budget, it remembers those workers and the importance of that work and that it provides sufficient resources to enable them to carry it out.

I also want to mention the good work that is carried out by volunteers in road safety committees throughout the North.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment:

With respect, however, we would rather that those people had little such work to do. I hope that people will leave their cars at home and enjoy the festivities safely. I support the motion.

Mr Bell: It is a disappointing time for me to speak to the motion. I congratulate my colleague the Member for South Antrim for bringing this timely motion to the Assembly. Unfortunately, however, in my own area of Ards, another three arrests for drink-driving were made over the weekend. The message that needs to go out has not gone out. I fear that we will have to increase the penalties for the offence.

If we are absolutely honest, although this may not be the time to deal with what we want to, we have to deal with the situation in Northern Ireland as it is. In my constituency, 2,092 breath tests were carried out, and, of those, 209 led to arrests. I congratulate the Police Service in general, as well as the local police. However, the reality is that the police are being forced to put specialised operations in place to tackle driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. We all want a Christmas card that says "Season's Greetings", but I hope that we can take the PSNI's Operation Season's Greetings without any negative consequences. However, I fear that the reality will be somewhat different. When talking to police officers in Ards recently, I heard that they had stopped three consecutive cars and that all three drivers had a blood:alcohol count that was above the acceptable legal limit.

When I was appointed by the Assembly to the Committee of the Regions, I did some research, and there is firm evidence that two or three out of every 100 drivers in Europe drive under the influence of alcohol or drugs. There seem to be particularly dangerous times for doing so. For example, the summertime is bad, the hours of 8.00 pm and 4.00 am are particularly bad, and some 30% of all arrests are made between midnight and 3.00 am.

In Finland, 40% of drivers have taken a random breath test. The statistics for Northern Ireland do not even come close. According to a Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency (NISRA) survey, some 39% of Northern Ireland's drivers who have consumed alcohol feel that they will never be stopped and checked and that drink-driving is, therefore, a risk worth taking.

It has been confirmed that more than 10,000 deaths in the European Union are caused by driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. It leads to anaesthesia, changes in behaviour and changes in cognitive processes. We have had hard-hitting television adverts, and we have got the message across to drivers. It is not a matter of ignorance. They are fully aware of the dangers of driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, yet 70% are prepared to take the chance because they believe that they will never have a random breath test.

1.15 pm

Therefore, I think that we need a two-pronged approach. First, we need to look at the sentencing policy. Certain states of the United States have what they call truth in sentencing. That means that if someone is convicted of causing death by grievous bodily injury or by careless driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, their 14-year sentence will mean a 14-year sentence, because there is truth in the sentencing policy. We need to look again at our sentencing policy and put the truth back into it, as they have done in some states of the United States of America. If people are convicted, they should serve the full sentence.

Secondly, and in conclusion, we need to increase the number of random breath tests. I congratulate the Police Service for its Operation Season's Greetings —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Bell: I also congratulate our police for working with an Garda Síochána, particularly in the border areas, to ensure unilateral enforcement of road safety.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion, the subject of which is hugely important at this time of year. This is the busiest time of year and unfortunately, with the weather that we are having, the most dangerous as well.

I know from personal experience the turmoil brought about by deaths on the road caused by a drunk driver. In 1995, a younger brother of mine and his wife were killed by a drunk driver just outside Derry, in Donegal. They were coming home from a caravan site near Culdaff when, near Derry, they were taken out by someone in a Volvo car who was well over the alcohol limit. I think that he was two or three times

over the alcohol limit and was driving in excess of 90 mph. They had two children in the car, Laura and Joanne, who were both hospitalised; Joanne was in intensive care for months after the crash. They are still coming round. One can imagine the turmoil and trauma that comes to someone's door when they get a knock from the police. I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that both the Ramsey family and the McCann family were devastated. Not only that, but we were at the caravan site and had to visit the scene after getting home and being told of the awfulness of the tragedy.

That is a lesson. I welcome the motion from the Member for South Antrim; it is a very timely one. We still have people who believe that it is acceptable to continue to go out, have a drink and, as Danny pointed out earlier, quite arrogantly say, "I am going to take one for the road". The evidence is very clear that people are still doing that.

The driver, who was found guilty in a court in Letterkenny for that offence, had all the best references in the world for his good character, and he literally served several weeks in prison. However, soon after the case, I was stopped by a friend of mine who has now passed on, a sergeant in the police in Derry, who was fit to tell me that that same person had had a number of previous convictions in Derry for similar offences. Therefore, I say to the Minister that this highlights the importance of cross-border co-operation to ensure that people do the time for the crime that they commit. In this case, the person did not do the time; he literally got away with murder.

When accidents happen because a driver is selfish enough to drink or, as Members have said, take drugs; that pain is very difficult to bear. At a personal level, the trauma, stress and heartache are very difficult to come to terms with. We all know the terrible impact that serious injuries and lives lost on the road have on the families involved, and we recognise and accept that it is totally not socially acceptable any more to drive after drinking. If people plan to take a drink, they should make the appropriate arrangements to get home safely. However, unfortunately, there are circumstances in which people believe that they can get away with it.

According to PSNI figures for last year, there were 369 collisions in which either alcohol or

drugs was the principal factor. As a result of those accidents, 23 lives in Northern Ireland were lost, which is 23 too many; some 429 people were injured, 120 of whom were seriously injured. I understand that, during the most recent drink-driving campaign, the PSNI performed preliminary roadside breath tests on almost 6,000 drivers. Sadly, as other Members said, 400 drivers failed the test, went to court and lost their licence. They should count themselves lucky that they did not take their own life or someone else's.

Even in the context of social and peer pressure and the penalty points system, people continue the inexcusable practice of driving after consuming alcohol and taking drugs, including, as the Member who moved the motion said, prescribed drugs. Given that, we need to consider more stringent penalties and greater effort in detection. The PSNI is doing good work, and other Members talked about the link with an Garda Síochána, which is so important for cross-border roads.

I thank the Minister for attending today's debate.

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

Mr P Ramsey: I ask the Minister to outline what further measures he intends to take to educate and convince people that they should not drink and drive or take drugs and drive.

Mr Lunn: I am pleased to associate the Alliance Party with the motion, which is particularly timely as we move into December.

Our accident statistics for 2010 are, according to how we read them, either exceptionally good or still disappointing, especially the headline figure for fatalities. I will not quote exact statistics, but I understand that, up to the beginning of this month, the number of fatalities was about half of last year's total. I know that things have deteriorated slightly, but it is probable that, at the year's end, there will be a significant improvement on the figures for 2009. It is also, sadly, inevitable that, in the remaining weeks of 2010, there will be a seasonal increase in serious accidents caused by excessive speed, weather conditions and, as mentioned in the motion, driving under the influence of drink or drugs.

The motion encourages all road users to behave responsibly and acknowledges the detection

efforts of the PSNI, but it also begs the question: what more can we do? As Mr Kinahan said, we should look to the historical context. In the 1960s, when I first held a licence, the public attitude was, let me put it this way, considerably more relaxed than it is now. Drink-driving was tolerated. I cannot remember if there was such a thing as a breathalyser in the 1960s; if there was, it was in its infancy. A figure of 300 fatalities a year was reached in one or two years of the 1960s. It is a measure of the success of the many campaigns, enforcement of the law and, in particular, the perseverance of the RUC, the PSNI and the Department in bringing about the change in public attitude that our statistics have improved and that convicted drink drivers, whether they have been involved in an accident or not, are now regarded quite differently in public opinion: they are now convicted offenders, not just unlucky, as was the case years ago.

Our present limit of 80 mg is slightly higher than that of most European countries, but the offence carries an automatic 12-month ban — at least, it is supposed to — which is not the case in most of Europe. All drivers here who are involved in an accident to which the police are called can expect to be asked to take a breath test, whether or not they are at fault. A second offence would, nominally, carry an automatic five-year ban in Northern Ireland. Those penalties are probably the most severe in western Europe. The only positive measures that we can perhaps consider, apart from the voluntary ones involving the licensed trade that one or two Members mentioned, are a further reduction in the limit to the European standard of 50 mg and random tests, to which I would have no objection.

More important would be an absolute enforcement of the automatic disqualification rules. Far too many people, even yet, manage to get away on a technicality; whether it is the quality of equipment or police procedures, people still get away with it, and that should not happen.

In this country, the driving licence is widely perceived to be a right. It is not a right but a privilege. It is almost unheard of for a judge to impose a life ban on someone who caused a particularly serious accident or committed a drink offence. Judges should have discretion to impose life bans on drivers who commit a second offence and custodial sentences for

particularly bad ones. A prison sentence should be mandatory for third offences.

I wish the PSNI success with its campaign to apprehend the remaining slow learners. I hope that we will have as close to an accident-free December as humanly possible. I commend the Member for moving the motion.

Mr Spratt: Unfortunately, in the run-up to Christmas, many people will make the potentially fatal mistake of driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Combined with wintry road conditions, that mistake can result in many accidents and tragedies. I welcome this motion being brought to the House today.

I take the opportunity to commend the police for their efforts to reduce the number of accidents, deaths and serious injuries that result from people driving under the influence. According to police statistics, that is the second most common cause of injury on our roads. Indeed, in the 2009-2010 statistical year, 112 collisions were caused by drivers who were under the influence of drink or drugs. There were 17 fatal collisions in 2008 and 18 in 2009. Despite that increase, the number of serious and slight collisions has decreased, which has to be welcomed.

According to a statement that the police released at the start of the year, they have carried out 5,780 roadside preliminary breath tests, which found 414 drivers to be over the legal limit. The good news is that that is 13% fewer than last year. As my colleague Jonathan Bell mentioned, the figures for Europe as a whole are shocking. At least 10,000 deaths are caused by drink-driving in Europe every year, which is a frightening statistic.

My colleague Edwin Poots has worked hard to highlight the dangers of drink-driving. If the Department of the Environment's advertising campaign saves only one life this winter, it will have been worthwhile. Last year's road safety advert showed people that the senses and skills that a driver requires are impaired by only a small amount of alcohol. It is vital that drivers are made aware of that. There are simple and obvious ways to avoid drink-driving, such as the use of public transport, taxis and designated drivers. There is no excuse for drink-driving whatsoever.

I will go off my script, which contains more statistics. I listened to what Pat Ramsey said

earlier. I heard many such stories and saw many such cases during my time in the Police Service. Every fatal incident caused by drink-driving means that our police officers and Ambulance Service and Fire and Rescue Service personnel will visit a horrible scene. I will give one personal experience that will haunt me until the day that I die. It happened not far from where we are today. A driver, who had one passenger in her car, was turning right in the early hours of the morning. She had already turned her steering wheel as she allowed oncoming traffic to pass. Along came a driver who was still drinking; he had a tin of beer between his knees as he drove the car.

He smashed into the back of the car, causing a serious collision. The car was pushed across into the path of traffic, and the impact of the crash caused the doors of the car to lock. Two people were trapped, and the car immediately went on fire. Within minutes, all the emergency services were there, including the Police Service. I was there as a member of the Police Service. We got one person, who had received horrendous burns, out of the car, but the young woman burned to death. We all had to stand and watch that happening. That incident will haunt me for the rest of my life. That is one reason why no one should ever drink and drive.

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

Mr Spratt: I urge everyone to support the motion.

1.30 pm

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion, which is timely, as it is close to Christmas. It is interesting to note that the European road safety week finished yesterday. Perhaps those European-wide safety promotional weeks do not register with us as much as they should. Therefore, something as local as the motion before us is required.

When we think of road fatalities, injuries and road safety, tragically, many of our thoughts turn to young males. I am glad that Mr Kinahan referred to the good, responsible drivers, because I do not want to send out a message from the House that one group causes the problem. I know from Mr Kinahan's remarks that he was making sure that such a message did not go out. That was a diplomatic and

sincere way of remembering that some of that generation have different attitudes. Tragically, however, not everybody does. Therefore, we are hit with tragic news that seems all the more poignant around Christmas.

Many Members raised issues such as licensing, sentences, reaction times, levels and limits. I will leave those points aside, as there is no need for me to make them again.

The debate has ranged from personal anecdotes to references to border areas. As I travelled here this morning, I was listening to Pat Kenny's radio show. With Christmas in mind, there was an item on how the emergency services from Donegal and Tyrone mounted an operation over the weekend purely and simply to raise awareness of the issue in the run-up to Christmas. We heard from a garda who had to deliver a sad message to a family. There was also an interview with a husband and wife, who, five years ago, received one of those dreadful visits by from a garda to tell them of the loss of their son. I do not know whether drink or drugs were involved in that instance, but the bottom line was that it highlighted the dreadful part of what unfolds after a serious incident on the roads. The motion puts drink and drugs under the microscope, but delivering bad news is always poignant. That husband and wife were able to recall down to the last word the conversation that evening, and they described how their lives have changed since losing their son.

I identify with what Mr Spratt and Mr Ramsey said. We all know of similar stories. We know enough people to have knowledge, some more directly than others, of what happens in the aftermath of an accident and how, when the headlines fade, the parents, siblings, family circle and friends must try to lead their lives. It is a difficult issue.

None of us wants to be a killjoy. We want people to enjoy Christmas. However, the intent of the motion is sincere, and it highlights the fact that the chances of death or injury on the roads increase during the festive season. Therefore, let us hope that the Assembly's contribution, through the proposers of the motion and Members who spoke in the debate, helps to raise awareness so that there will be fewer injuries and less loss of life. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr I McCrea: I support the motion, and, like other Members, commend its proposers.

As a councillor, and since being elected an MLA, I have often raised the issue of dangerous driving and road safety. I am pleased that during the past year, the number of road deaths has reduced compared with previous years. That has to be welcomed. However, as other Members said, one death on the roads is one too many.

Christmas is normally the time when we hear of a significant increase in the number of fatalities on the roads. Therefore, the motion is timely. In the weeks leading up to Christmas 2009, a number of fatalities occurred on the roads. As other Members said, it is sad to think that, at Christmas, there will be an empty place at the dinner table in many homes in Northern Ireland.

Statistics show that there was a 13% drop in drink-driving figures last Christmas. However, as my colleague Jimmy Spratt pointed out, 414 motorists were caught drink-driving. Although it is good news that those people were caught by the police, one wonders why the message is still not sinking in. In recent years, the police have stepped up roadside patrols and random breathalyser tests, as my colleague mentioned.

Although many media campaigns focus on the worst-case scenario of death by dangerous driving, many other road accidents are caused by alcohol or drugs. In 2009-2010, 369 collisions that caused injury were due to alcohol; the total number of casualties stood at 582. That is a significant figure in a population as small as Northern Ireland's.

Formerly, as a member of the Committee for the Environment, I attended a RoadSafe roadshow in Dungannon with the Minister. It allowed local schools to hear from the emergency services, police officers, paramedics, the Fire and Rescue Service, and accident and emergency doctors. For me, the most important report was that of a young woman who was in a wheelchair. An issue that I have mentioned previously and will continue to raise is that the number of people who are injured is an almost forgotten statistic. We deal with statistics for the number of people who have lost their lives. However, many people throughout the country and, indeed, the world receive serious injuries and are almost forgotten. Although they are considered lucky to be alive, often their injuries are such that they may not be considered quite so lucky.

Mr Bell: Does the Member agree that he has raised just one of the high-profile events in which the Minister has been involved? Public

awareness of the issue has never been higher than under the current Minister. As a result, last year's figure of 104 deaths in Northern Ireland has been reduced to 51. A significant contributor to that has been the public-awareness campaign, which includes the roadshow in Dungannon that the Member mentioned. Does he also acknowledge the cost to the Health Service in dealing with the effects of drink-driving, which was some £286 million over a four-year period?

Mr I McCrea: I thank my colleague for his intervention. I, too, record my delight that the Minister has taken on that issue and continues to do so. I know that he has been a champion, and I praise him for his work.

The issue that Mr Bell raises about our Health Service was raised at the event that I attended. Dangerous driving or driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs has a major impact on the Health Service. No doubt that will be heard more and more as we deal with the CSR.

Catching offenders is down to the vigilance of the Police Service, and I commend it for that. However, we also need to adopt a test kit that is more reliable than police vigilance; saliva-testing devices are used in Victoria, Australia, for example.

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

Mr I McCrea: Much has been done to reduce the number of deaths on our roads caused by drink or drugs. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: We are grateful to colleagues for supporting the motion. Indeed, everyone spoke exceptionally well on it, and some did so passionately from personal experience. Mr Ramsey and Mr Spratt reminded us of the human cost of such tragedies and that, behind a news headline, there is a real human cost. I pay tribute to the Fire and Rescue Service, police and Health Service workers who deal with the aftermath. The structure of our Fire and Rescue Service often means that they know the victims that they have to free from car wreckages, which adds a personal dimension to the work that they do.

It is worth reminding ourselves that there are huge problems facing the Police Service in detecting drugs in the body: the speed at which drugs leave the body and the method of

identifying someone who is driving under the influence of drugs. Mixing drugs, even legal ones, with alcohol can impair people's driving. The message must go out from here that people should carefully read warnings on medication that they are taking and be very wary of mixing it with any alcohol at all.

One of the points not raised so far about drinking and driving is the time that it can take for alcohol to get out of the body. Some people who do all the right things have to bear in mind that it is not all right to drink until the early hours of the morning and then to get up to drive to work. People can drink responsibly the night before — have a designated driver or take a taxi home — and then get up and drive to work.

There has also been an increase in the amount of cheap alcohol and the amount of alcohol being consumed at home. That creates a problem, in that people have no way of knowing the amount consumed. It is not measured out, as in a pub, where it is a pint, a measure of spirits or a glass of wine. When drinking at home, people tend greatly to underestimate the amount that they have consumed.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Member agree with me that people who choose to take large quantities of alcohol at weekends should consider using — before going to work on Monday morning — a breathalysing test kit that can be bought for a small amount of money to ensure that they do not break the limit and their road awareness is up to speed?

1.45 pm

Mr McCallister: The Member raises an interesting point, and one that is well worth exploring. I have listened to debates on this before, and it has been suggested that such equipment should be installed in pubs. A danger is that if drinkers used such equipment to check and found that they were all right, the result might encourage them to drink more. However, the point is well worth exploring, and we should find out whether it has something to contribute to our overall safety aim.

As Members from all sides said, we have been working at this problem for an incredibly long time. Thankfully, this year, we have been more successful on our roads than previously. However, we cannot be complacent. We must constantly get out the message about drink,

drugs and speeding. The police must constantly enforce the law and try to educate the public.

Along with the Minister and other Members, I attended a road safety event that was organised by the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster at several sites around Northern Ireland. It was an excellent event that was designed to show the difficulties and trouble that drink-driving can cause. It particularly targeted younger male drivers, which, as Mr Leonard mentioned, is one of the key groups that we have to get our message through to.

This has been a very useful debate.

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

Mr McCallister: The debate keeps a focus on this issue and acknowledges the good work of the police and the Department. I hope that they keep up that good work and ensure that this is a happy Christmas for everyone.

Lord Morrow: It has been said that this motion is very timely, and I agree with that comment. It is proper that we place on record our appreciation of the PSNI, which has succeeded in prosecuting individuals who, it appears, care as little about the safety of others as about their own safety.

The motion might have gone a bit further. It is intended to draw attention to the fact that, in the month of December, the risk on our roads increases because of excessive use of alcohol. Too many people are prepared to take the risk, which is totally unacceptable. To drive a vehicle requires full concentration. A vehicle is not a toy and, in the wrong hands, it is a lethal weapon — as lethal as a machine gun in the hands of a dedicated terrorist. Cloud a driver's concentration with alcohol, or any other mind-altering drug, and it is a recipe for disaster. Too many lives have been ruined by drunk drivers and too many innocent people killed or maimed in accidents caused by them.

Mr Pat Ramsey graphically illustrated how his family was affected as a result of being victims of a driver who was unfit to drive. Unfortunately, Mr Ramsey lost members of his family through that horrific incident. Jimmy Spratt graphically drew to our attention a case in which he was involved as a police officer when he was called to the scene of a crash. It is a pity that the

whole public cannot have a greater view of these things. It might just make an impact.

The advertisements on our television screens get more horrific and more graphic as they attempt to alert us all to the awful consequences of drink-driving. The most horrific advertisements are being used. Indeed, some of them are so bad that they are difficult to watch. Unfortunately, they still do not get the message across. It is right that they should be shown and that that campaign continues, because we are in a situation in which drink-driving is not being taken seriously by road users. For my part, I find it very difficult to watch those advertisements and I would not want young children to watch them.

I took a short time to look at the court list in my constituency. In the next week alone, 42 cases of driving while unfit through drink or drugs will be before the courts. One court, which has an overall case list of 49, has 11 cases connected to drink-driving or drug-driving. Although that is a horrifying number, the PSNI must be praised for bringing those people to court. It has certainly had its work cut out, and it is a very difficult task.

However, those cases of unfit driving often have an alarming amount of accompanying charges. In fact, five of the cases involved accidents in which injury and damage occurred. Four others involved assaults on police officers, three relate to driving while disqualified, and eight are charges of dangerous driving. It must also be noted that 13 are charges of driving without insurance, so if damage had been caused by drink-driving or drug-driving, Joe Taxpayer would have picked up the cost.

Other additional offences include resisting police, disorderly behaviour, making threats to kill and possession of offensive weapons. Those are all nasty offences without being combined with an intoxicated driver and a vehicle. We have to ask ourselves whether we need further tightening of the legislation or whether we are getting the message across. Sometimes, I fear that we are not.

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

Lord Morrow: At present, a person's first conviction for driving when unfit results in a 12-month driving ban and a fine. If the person is convicted again in the next 10 years, he is fined again and handed a three-year ban; the most

lax jail term possible. Perhaps that will have a sobering effect, but I still have my doubts.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I want to commend the emergency services — the police, the fire brigade and the Ambulance Service — on their very difficult task. Quite often, it is the police or the fire brigade who arrive at the scene of an accident first. They have to deal with a situation that they are not always qualified to deal with. They then have to cope with the after-effects that the incident has on them.

One point running through the debate is that the message is not getting out to those who continue to drive under the influence of drink or drugs or who drive irresponsibly. The motion urges all drivers to drive responsibly. I think that people may be more irresponsible when driving compared to in other areas of their lives, because when they get into a car, they feel quite safe or cocooned.

The other thing with respect to young people is that there is no way that they can find out what it is like to lose control of a vehicle unless they have experienced it, which I have, a few times. Quite often, it can be fatal. Young people drive very fast cars now, and they often drive only at weekends and do not have experience. There are a lot more vehicles on the road than there were when I first started driving as a young person, which increases the likelihood of a head-on collision if someone loses control of their car. The main roads and back roads are full of traffic at the moment.

The other issue is driving instruction and training for young people. I see many young people make dire mistakes while driving in front of me on the roads. They will have passed their driving tests only a few months ago. There is something wrong with that situation. I believe that they do not spend enough time under instruction and I think that that is a problem.

Further learning is needed. A simulation of a smash in which people are involved might be needed because most people's knowledge of what happens when brakes are applied or control is lost is limited. It takes at least 10 years' driving experience for people to have a chance of being a safe driver. Those who have driven for a long time will know that.

There are other questions about being fit to drive. How many people are alcoholics or drug

addicts? Some of those people use drugs and drink every single day of their lives and are permanently under the influence. Are those people fit to drive while other people who have sight problems, and so on, are told that they can no longer drive? That situation has not been dealt with.

Someone said that “none for the road” should be the way to go. The adverts are all there, but I do not think that they impact on young people. I have attended demonstrations given by the police and other groups about what happens in emergency situations, but I am not sure whether the young people who attended were, at the end of the night, any more affected than normal. They seemed to be able to shut out all that, so there is a question about getting that message across to the young people who go out at the weekend and quite often drive for the fun of it and, whether or not they have drink taken, do not give any thought to what could happen. There are two sets of drivers: those who depend on driving for their work and those who, by comparison, will not be affected if they lose their licence. There is a difference.

Lord Morrow spoke about the penalties: they are not high enough. For example, few people realise that their no claims bonus would be gone for three years, and the impact of that amounts to thousands of pounds. They cannot find insurance elsewhere and have to stay with their original company, and the cost can be £1,000 or more each year. That type of information is not available to inform young people. In fact, young people losing their licences immediately might not be a bad thing. I want such issues to be looked at.

When a vehicle loses control, the impacts on individuals and families are enormous. We need to get that message through to more people. It is not always young people who are responsible. Quite a number of people who have no intention of changing their way of life —

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

Mr McHugh: — around alcohol are much older.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I thank the Member for South Antrim and the Member for South Down for raising this timely debate on drink- and drug-driving. I recognise the fact that many Members and constituents

are concerned about the issue, particularly as we approach the festive season.

On a general note: road safety is my top priority because it is about saving lives and preventing serious injuries. Although the number of deaths on the roads is half what it was this time last year, the recent upsurge in deaths, and the anguish and grief that comes with them, reminds us that we can never, ever drop our guard. With the darker evenings, wet roads and more traffic on those roads, I appeal to all people to take extreme care, pay attention, slow down, wear their seat belt and avoid driving while overtired or after having taken drink or drugs. Pedestrians should always use footpaths when possible and wear bright or fluorescent clothing at night. We cannot be complacent. If people make mistakes, that could cost them or another road user their lives.

Earlier this year, for the first time, no one was killed on our roads for some seven weeks, which is unprecedented. I am not sure whether I will get it exactly right, but I thought of a Van Morrison lyric:

“Wouldn’t it be great if it was like this all the time?”

Wouldn’t it be great if the Fire and Rescue Service did not have to cut people out of cars after a road accident? Wouldn’t it be great if the Ambulance Service did not have to provide emergency support to try to keep people alive? Wouldn’t it be great if police officers did not have to call at people’s homes to break the bad news that a loved one has just been killed or seriously injured on the roads and that they need to get to hospital straight away? Wouldn’t it be great if medical staff in our accident and emergency units did not have to deal with the aftermath of those accidents, and wouldn’t it be great if families gathering for Christmas did not have an empty place at the table as a result of a death or injury on the road?

2.00 pm

Drink- and drug-driving play a key part in adding to the list of people who are killed or seriously injured on our roads. In fact, in the past five years, 115 people lost their life as a result of people driving under the influence of drink or drugs, and a further 559 people were seriously injured as a result of people driving under the influence of drink or drugs. I regard that as a record of shame. Shame on the people who went out under the influence of drink or drugs;

as a result, 115 lives were lost, and 559 people were seriously injured over the past five years. We would not tolerate that in any other area, so I do not see why we should tolerate it when it comes to drink- and drug-driving.

December is a killer month on our roads, and Members will be reminded of that fact again and again as they listen to road safety advertising on their radios in the coming weeks. If the trend of the past five years continues throughout 2010, a further 14 people will potentially lose their life during December. What is to blame for that consistent spike each year? The main factors are carelessness and inattention, excessive speed and driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Collectively and in that order, those three factors are largely responsible for December road deaths.

That poses another crucial question: who is to blame? It will come as no surprise to Members that 17- to 24-year-olds are the single biggest problem area. However, I hasten to add that they are not the only problem area. Therefore, our focus should not be concentrated solely on young people, because they are not exclusively the problem on our roads. Research shows that the average age of those detected drink-driving in Northern Ireland is 33, and 21% of people caught drink-driving are between 35 and 49 years of age. Shame on those people. When people get to that age, you would think that they would have a bit of sense, but there we have it. Many people in that age group go out under the influence of drink or drugs, and it is not good enough.

Night-time driving is a particular problem when it comes to drink-driving. Between midnight and 6.00 am, 48% of all collisions that lead to death are associated with drink- or drug-driving.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister accept that many accidents that occur in the early hours of the morning take place on rural roads and that poor lighting conditions and the state of those roads are part of the problem? Furthermore, does he agree that people who live and drive in rural areas must take extra care in December?

The Minister of the Environment: Those are certainly issues. However, I stress the point that the night-time problem is exacerbated greatly when people go out to bars and clubs and drive home thereafter. It really is not good enough. Those people need to get the message, and I believe that they are getting it, because it is

reflected in this year's figures, which I will give Members later so that they understand where I am coming from.

The motion specifically highlights driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, with good reason. During the month of December, one in five fatalities is due to incidents involving alcohol or drugs. Sadly, December is not the only month in which drink- and drug-driving are a killer on our roads. In fact, the number of people killed as a result of drink- and drug-driving tends to peak between April and July, proving that the message, "Never ever drink and drive" is right not just for Christmas but for everyone every day of the year. Those messages, combined with active enforcement by the PSNI, have led to a welcome drop in the number of drink-drivers being detected over the festive period. There is a strong indication that the "Never ever drink and drive" message, combined with the likelihood of detection, is changing attitudes in Northern Ireland.

Last week, I discussed the statistics with the Assistant Chief Constable. Our roads are being used slightly less than in previous years — 1.8% less — as a result of the recession; however, the number of people killed on our roads is down by almost 50%. We need to look behind the statistics to see how they stack up. Is it just a matter of luck, are drivers behaving more safely, or are other factors at work? There has been a 24% reduction in serious collision accidents, so it is clear that people are getting the message and are driving more carefully, giving more respect and courtesy on the roads and paying more attention. I have no doubt that there are fewer people on the roads under the influence of drink and drugs.

The likelihood of detection is very real. During the past five years, the PSNI has conducted more than 21,000 drink-drive evidential breath tests. More than 19,000 of those tests involved male drivers, and almost 2,000 tests were carried out in December. A description given by a driver who got behind the wheel of his car while under the influence of drink provides a shocking insight:

"The more I drank, the less I cared."

That is why my Department has, for many years, been working hard to convince road users not to take any alcohol at all before driving. The message is clear: do not drink any alcohol if you plan to drive the same evening, and, if you have

been drinking, do not drive the next morning. There is every chance that you may still be affected and every chance that you may be caught. There are no quick fixes for getting rid of alcohol; it just takes time.

Although the problems caused by drink-drivers are well known, the battle against those who drive while unfit through drugs is in its early stages. We know that drug-driving is a growing threat to road safety, particularly as one in five dead drivers tested had impairing drugs in their blood. Last year, my Department launched a new campaign entitled "Steps", which highlights the many ways that drugs, including prescribed medications and other over-the-counter products, can affect a driver, such as slower reaction times, distorted perception and increased risk-taking, to name but a few.

To date, screening and evidential issues surrounding drug-driving have not been straightforward. At present, the police have to rely on being able not only to prove that a driver is unfit to drive because of drugs but to produce evidence of the resulting impaired driving. Much of the difficulty is down to the fact that, although drink-driving includes one drug — alcohol — drug-driving includes a wide range of drugs. I am encouraged that, in GB, trials of new equipment to test for drug-driving could commence within a year. My Department, along with the PSNI, has registered a keen interest that Northern Ireland be included in any such equipment trials.

Members will be aware of my intention to introduce a new lower blood:alcohol limit: an alcohol limit of 50 micrograms of alcohol in 100 ml of blood for all drivers and, possibly, a limit of 20 micrograms of alcohol in 100 ml of blood for professional and newly qualified drivers, as well as other measures, including police powers to carry out random breath tests.

Northern Ireland is not alone when it comes to proposed changes in drink-drive legislation. We will continue to put pressure on our counterparts in the UK to ensure that they come along with us on the issue. I reassure Members of my commitment to reducing the drink-driving limit in Northern Ireland, regardless of any decision that is made in GB. In the meantime, my Department will continue to work with the PSNI and the Home Office to make sure that the new breath-testing devices are tested and type-approved, that they will be suitable to test at any new

lower limits and that they will be robust enough to stand any evidential test in a court of law.

We started with the fact that December is a killer month on Northern Ireland's roads. That is a fact that we are working hard to change. The PSNI has already launched its Christmas anti-drink-driving operation for 2010, and my Department will continue to support that increased enforcement activity with the use of extensive television, radio and digital advertising. The road safety messages will be clear this Christmas: "Never, ever drink and drive."; "What steps will you take to stop a drug-driver wrecking your life?"; and "Go safe; it is the best gift that you can give any family this Christmas".

Mr B McCrea: I thank my colleagues Danny Kinahan and John McCallister for tabling the motion, which most Members agreed is timely. I apologise to the Members who spoke earlier, because I did not hear exactly what they said. However, they will be pleased to know that Danny Kinahan has given me copious notes. It is sometimes quite useful, given that there is much agreement on what we are talking about, to mention the various points that Members made. I will refer to those during my winding-up speech.

I know that people will have noticed my black eye. Given that I was recently on the receiving end of a collision with a tree, a lot of Members' points have an all too real sense. The theme has come across during the debate that people do not get the message until something happens to them and affects their life. My initial reaction on that windy, dark night when I hit the tree was that I was very unlucky that the car was a write-off. Later, however, I thought with a little bit more reflection that I was actually not unlucky but extremely fortunate. Had I been going 10 mph slower, I probably would not have hit the tree; had I been going 10 mph faster, I probably would not be here.

One interesting aspect of the event is that a lot of people phoned me to discuss similar problems that they have had and to talk about the split second that it takes to change someone's life. People have phoned me to say that they were less fortunate than me and have broken legs, severed arteries and so on as a result of accidents that happened when they were travelling at a relatively slow speed. When he moved the motion, Mr Kinahan was keen to

stress to me that it in no sense aims to be a killjoy or to say that people should not go out and enjoy themselves at this festive time of the year. However, the stark reality is that any drink at all impairs judgement and reaction time. Those seconds are critical.

I was struck by what Mr McCallister said about the difficulty of the morning after. People go out, have a good night and go home for a bit of sleep. The morning after, they drive, and, quite often, if they are not over the limit, their driving is certainly impaired. That causes danger not only to themselves but to others. Cathal Boylan started the debate and said that even one drink was one too many. I agree with that. The Minister said that he is looking at what the legal limit should be, and I have to say that there is a strong case for having no legal limit and having a zero tolerance towards alcohol and, it goes without saying, drugs in the bloodstream.

Mr Bell: The Member will find universal agreement for his suggestion that we have a lowest minimum level. However, does he accept that people who use mouthwashes and so forth will be over such a limit and that a complete zero limit will, therefore, be unenforceable?

2.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: I take the point, and I was coming on to the points that Mr Kinahan made on that. I am aware that certain medicines contain alcohol. Mr Bell will probably agree that there is a huge danger in people saying that they will have one drink because they can do so within the legal limit.

Mr Bell and Mr Spratt will be aware from their positions on the Policing Board, of which I am also a member, that one of the more controversial issues that we have had to deal with is that police officers who have been convicted of drink-driving are now automatically dismissed from the service. People have said that it is particularly harsh that those officers lose their job, but it is the right stance to take. We have to get the message across that we are trying to protect people and that drink-drivers risk their own life and other people's lives, which is even more serious.

Lord Morrow and others mentioned education. I almost have to switch off some of the TV adverts, which are unwatchable and horrific. The viewer knows what is coming and just says "Whatever". Perhaps there is something in

dealing with the psychology of young people in a particular age group. There has to be some way of getting the message across, and I know that the Minister will join me in agreeing with the recent road safety shows organised by the Young Farmers' Clubs. We took a particularly vulnerable group — young men between 17 and 24 — and showed them what it is like to be cut out of a car, the pain and all the other issues that they might come across. An issue that came out of that had a particular impact on me, although it was, perhaps, less gruesome than other examples. It was a presentation that originated in America about a beautiful young lady who was the victim of a road traffic accident caused by a man who was under the influence of drink. The presentation included a build-up of what her life was and what her opportunities were before the accident. She had been burnt in the car, and the images were absolutely awful. Of course, the young man responsible will never forgive himself. The family should be involved in education, and the real change that is needed is of attitude. It is about having influence over people to say that that sort of behaviour is totally unacceptable, and it has taken many years to get that through.

At the risk of baring my soul completely, I recall an argument with a party colleague, which is very unusual for me. It took place in a small place called Kinallen. Like all good things in Northern Ireland, after a bit of argy-bargy, we sorted things out and decided to put the past behind us. He offered me —

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: A black eye?

Mr B McCrea: No, that does not happen all the time. He offered me a drink before I went. Given the amount of angst, the tumbler of Scotch was a peace offering from him. I said no — as it happens, I do not drink much — but the temptation was there because of the emotional argument beforehand. When I hit the A1 at Banbridge, mine was the only car on the road that was stopped by a police car. The policeman saw that I was a bit worried. I was worried not because I had anything to worry about — I had not had a drink — but because of what might have been. I was breathalysed. Even when you know that you have not had a single drink — mouthwash or anything else — you think about the consequences and ask how stupid you can be. That is the message that we have to put forward as we enter the festive season. We do

no one any favours by insisting that they have “one for the road” or that it will be OK because the person will be under the limit.

I note that Trevor Lunn takes a fairly severe stance on these issues, perhaps because of his years of experience in the insurance trade. However, I agree with Mr Lunn, although that usually annoys him. There is an issue emerging about the severity of these matters — [Interruption]. We will get that bit taken out of Hansard; we will be OK.

All of us have personal stories to tell, and, as Pat Ramsey said, that is the way to put the message across to the community. Billy Leonard, among others, mentioned that we should congratulate the PSNI, Roads Service, and the Fire and Rescue Service. It is, of course, good news that the number of deaths has fallen, but that may be only temporary.

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

Mr B McCrea: I hope that we have started the debate. We need to change the whole attitude of our society to alcohol, and today's debate is only one part of that. I, therefore, ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that December is a month that traditionally sees the highest number of road deaths; acknowledges the efforts of the PSNI in detecting drivers who drink and drive, or take drugs and drive; endorses the message that driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs is unacceptable; and urges all drivers to have due regard for the law and to drive responsibly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is Question Time. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 2.21 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed with questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), I remind Members that motions to amend Standing Orders, in respect of Question Time, were approved by Members earlier today. The changes mean that Question Time tomorrow will start at 2.00pm, that supplementary questions must only contain one enquiry and that Ministers' answers to questions may be no longer than two minutes. I intend to issue a Speaker's ruling to inform Members of how I intend to manage the changes to Standing Orders from next week.

As Ministers have already prepared their responses for today and tomorrow, I will use the discretion given to me in Standing Orders and allow additional time if needed. I may also allow Members a little latitude today and tomorrow during Question Time, although I must make it clear that that does not mean that Members should rise in their places in an attempt to ask multiple supplementary questions. I will not allow that to happen. When I say some latitude, I mean that some Members may want to take more time as they lead into their questions. If a Member persists in trying to ask multiple supplementary questions, I will ask that Member to take his or her seat, and I will move on to the next Member who wants to ask a supplementary question. If all Members on all sides of the House are clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Willie Clarke is not in his place for question 1; that is another issue that I intend to deal with. Departments and Ministers spend a great deal of time and resources on Question Time and on getting answers to Members, yet Members from all parties put their names down to ask questions and then do not come to the House to ask them. That is totally wrong, and I am considering what sanctions I can apply to the Members who do that. They are treating the House with contempt, and that practice must be condemned. Furthermore, those

Members give no reason for their absence. The problem is becoming more frequent, as is the practice of Members coming to the Table during Question Time to withdraw questions, again with no reason. I am looking at all of that and considering what sanctions I can bring to bear on Members who deliberately treat the House with utter contempt.

Victims: Funding

2. **Mr Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the funding provision available for individual victims since May 2007. (AQO 603/11)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Newton to answer that question.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): The Member raises a vital matter that concerns how our society moves forward. In many ways, we will be judged on how we treat the victims of the terrorist campaign.

I am pleased to say that funding to meet the needs of victims and survivors has more than doubled over the three-year comprehensive spending review (CSR) period since devolution. All areas of provision have increased, including funding for groups that provide key localised service and those professional organisations that meet the needs of victims and survivors. However, the most significant increase has been in direct payments to individual victims and their families. Through the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, OFMDFM delivers funding to individuals and their families. OFMDFM has been the sole sponsor of the fund since September 2006.

Upon devolution, addressing the pre-devolution legacy of neglect of victims' needs was of critical importance. In the first year of devolution, we more than doubled provision to the memorial fund from approximately £700,000 to just over £2 million; in 2009-2010, we increased that to £3.5 million per annum, and we anticipate a similar level of funding in this financial year. That will more than triple the provision that goes directly to individuals and their families and will mean that individual victims and survivors will have received approximately £10 million since the first full term of this devolved Assembly.

The funding provides for a number of schemes that provide financial help, respite care and address the physical needs of the injured. The schemes also provide hardship grants, school uniform grants and help with education and retraining needs.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the junior Minister for his response. How can the Department guarantee that the funding is going directly to victims and their families and is not being swallowed up by a group of administrators?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I can understand how, these days, bureaucracy and administrative costs can take a very large slice of any funding that goes out. It is necessary to minimise that cost, to cut out the bureaucracy that can surround it and to give value for money to the taxpayer to ensure that the maximum amount of money reaches the victims of the terrorist campaign.

As I said, the provision is distributed through the memorial fund in the form of a cheque, which ensures that the funding goes directly to the victims and their families. In relation to schemes such as the short break or respite scheme that I mentioned, the provision may take the form of a voucher, but the aim is to make registration with the fund as simple as possible and any subsequent application for funding as quick and as hassle free as possible for the user, while taking into account the need to ensure the protection of public money. I believe that the process has improved significantly over the lifespan of the memorial fund, particularly over the past few years. I have every confidence, and I hope that OFMDFM in general has every confidence, in the memorial fund, which we believe does an excellent and efficient job in that area.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the role that OFMDFM has played already to meet the needs of all victims and survivors, does the junior Minister agree that the needs of all victims and survivors of the conflict need to be recognised in any forthcoming Budget and Programme for Government?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): Implicit in that, there are perhaps two questions. I have already answered the first question by detailing the amount of money that had been budgeted for the service over this year, and I hope that we will maintain that over subsequent

years. However, there was also an implicit question about the definition of a victim. I am absolutely certain that the Member is aware that a private Member's Bill is going through its legislative stages in the Assembly. If that Bill is successful it will amend the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 that is currently used in relation to the distribution of funds through the Community Relations Council (CRC). If the Bill is passed, any amended 2006 Order definition would then be used in the distribution of funds through the CRC and any future delivery service for victims and survivors. Access to services that are provided by the National Health Service or other agencies would be unaffected by that change in definition.

Mr A Maginness: The junior Minister referred to the amounts expended. However, I note that £300,000 is being returned in the December monitoring round, and £127,000 is being returned from the Victims' Commission in particular.

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

Mr A Maginness: Would the Minister like to comment on that and give reasons why that happened?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): That is an important question. The Member will be aware that we established that service with four victims' commissioners and we now have only three. I suggest to him that that may be, at least, a partial reason for the return of those moneys. He will also be aware that we are establishing a new service for victims, and we will take up the slack.

Titanic Quarter: Paint Hall

3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on their recent visit to the Paint Hall in Belfast's Titanic Quarter. (AQO 604/11)

The First Minister: Building a strong working relationship with global media organisations has been one of the key objectives of both the deputy First Minister and I on our visits to the United States. Those visits have produced real results. The film 'Your Highness' returned a direct spend to the Northern Ireland economy of approximately £12 million for an investment of some £1.15 million. Series 1 of 'Game of Thrones' is anticipated to return a direct

spend to the local economy of approximately £17 million for an investment of £1.6 million. If series 1 proves successful, the potential exists for production to continue on up to seven series at the Paint Hall, which could equate to a total direct spend in the local economy of an estimated £140 million for an investment of some £11 million. It is necessary to understand that the decision by HBO to commission the second series of 'Game of Thrones' could be made as early as April next year.

We have had local success as well, which should be pointed out to the Assembly. The second series of 'Sesame Tree' arrived on our screens last week. It was made for and by people from Northern Ireland and has been taken by CBeebies for broadcast to the whole of the United Kingdom. That is an excellent achievement by the local production company, Sixteen South.

Clearly, global entertainment organisations that we met, such as HBO, Universal and others, feel that Northern Ireland has something to offer. A significant attraction is undoubtedly the magnificent facility of the Paint Hall in Belfast's Titanic Quarter. The deputy First Minister and I recently visited the set of HBO's 'Game of Thrones', which further highlighted to us the opportunities that the Paint Hall presents to film and TV producers. It is one of the largest studio spaces in Europe. The recent investments by HBO and Universal are helping to grow not only the creative industries here but our local economy.

Mr McQuillan: Will the First Minister outline how many jobs that investment has created?

The First Minister: Very often, people look at the creative industries, see a film or a TV series being made and think that it has employed, perhaps, 20, 30 or 40 actors, or whatever it turns out to be. In actual fact, probably about 800 individuals have been employed at some stage or another in the present production by HBO. It goes well beyond actors. There are make-up artists, costume designers, location experts, drivers, caterers, visual effects specialists, carpenters, plasterers, prop hands, hairstylists, electricians, editors and fabricators. Indeed, when the deputy First Minister and I were down, the producer told us how local companies were developing their product to be attractive. He mentioned in particular someone who was involved in landscape gardening and

how he was getting a better service from that company in Northern Ireland. It was no longer just taking the script and doing what it was told, but coming up with ideas that advanced the production. Again, that is an example of a Northern Ireland company that is as good as, if not better than, those elsewhere in the world. We are providing the opportunities, and I hope that local companies will benefit from them.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Dr Alasdair McDonnell, I remind Members that they must rise in their place to get called for a supplementary question. Nodding to the Chair or winking will not get you called, so you really need to rise in your place.

Dr McDonnell: I agree with the First Minister fully on how important it is to preserve and recycle the great icons of our maritime heritage, such as the Paint Hall. When he was down there, did the First Minister have any chance to look at another great icon of our maritime heritage, HMS Caroline? Are there any plans to preserve that ship, as part of Belfast's maritime heritage?

The First Minister: Mr Speaker, that does stretch the substantive question a little. I understand that some work is being done. Certainly, if the Member wants me to, I will write to him with some detail of that, although it is not yet at any final stages.

2.45 pm

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

4. **Dr Farry** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to summarise their analysis of the responses to the consultation on the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. (AQO 605/11)

The First Minister: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Robin Newton to answer this question.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for North Down for his question. He is aware that it was a draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) that went out for public consultation. The consultation was launched on 27 July and formally closed on 29 October. Indeed, following requests from a number of groups for additional time to complete their responses, officials granted one

additional week to allow for the inclusion of late returns.

The consultation attracted 290 written responses, which are being analysed, and a thematic report will be produced. The report will include the wealth of views and material gathered from the 11 public meetings and 15 targeted sectoral meetings that were held at a range of different locations throughout September and October.

As the consultation closed only recently, it is too early to offer an assessment of the responses to the draft CSI programme. We expect the initial report on the findings of the consultation to be with us in December 2010. We welcome the fact that that work has put a focus on the development of good relations and created debate on the issue.

Dr Farry: I thank the junior Minister for his answer. He and I share an understanding of the importance of a local good relations strategy. Anecdotally, a large number of responses have been highly critical of the CSI document, particularly, at one end, of its vision and, at the other, of its delivery. Bearing that in mind, if the analysis confirms the impression that we have anecdotally, can the junior Minister give the community an assurance that the Executive will rigorously and robustly change the policy to make it fit the needs and demands of the community rather than simply signing off on what is recognised, at this stage, as being a flawed draft?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I think that, in my answer, I covered the fact that a process is being undertaken to complete the analysis, and I indicated when I believe that that analysis will be completed. I do not believe that the Executive are in the mood even to consider signing off on something just because it was put out in the draft consultation document.

The Member's question kind of implies that the word "consultation" does not actually mean consultation. I assure the Member that the mood of the Executive is for consultation and that consultation has been extensive, and the 11 public meetings and 15 sectoral meetings that I referred to confirm that.

Mr Campbell: Will the junior Minister assure the House that, when he and OFMDFM analyse the 290 written responses to the draft document, the issue will be more about a genuine

understanding across the range of communities in Northern Ireland than about what sometimes appear to be the shallow presentational matters of a shared future?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): We are in no mood to have a shallow consultation exercise. When we went out to consultation, the Department had done extensive work to organise the geographical location of meetings and to ensure that those from all sections of the community who had an interest in such matters were invited. When I attended some of those consultation meetings, I was absolutely amazed by the numbers that turned up and the question-and-answer sessions that were held. I believe that officials have done a good job and that we will see the benefits of that mode of consultation.

In many ways, we in the Assembly are learning as we go along about how to consult the public effectively and how to ensure that a wide range of interests is taken into account through inviting their representatives to sit around the table and enter into discussions.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given that some parties have tried to present the CSI document as being separate but equal, can the junior Minister confirm that that concept is not being promoted and will not be promoted in any way?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I am not quite clear about what is meant by promoted in any way.

The First Minister: Separate but equal.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): Oh, separate but equal. I have already covered the issue of how we went out to consultation. The Member is quite right about the number of expressions that are used.

I do not believe that the expression “separate but equal” was prominent in the consultation exercise. It may be being used as part of a political agenda by others in the House. I refute the allegations absolutely, from whatever source they come. The draft document is focused on building and sharing a better, brighter future for all the people in Northern Ireland. That is its key aim. The allegation is motivated by party political policies and is not based on anything in the consultation document.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation carried out independent research to compare the draft

cohesion, sharing and integration document with ‘A Shared Future’. Its findings made it absolutely clear that, although the word “equality” is used more frequently in the draft document, its formulation is no stronger than that of ‘A Shared Future’. I challenge anyone who makes those allegations to substantiate them with evidence from the draft document.

Some people have commented on the infrequency of the use of the word “reconciliation” in the draft document. However, I firmly believe that the key concepts are embedded throughout. If we need to make it clearer that the purpose of the consultation is to listen and to address weaknesses and concerns, we will do that. Given that the subject is so important to the future of Northern Ireland, I am deeply saddened that many people, some of whom are in the Chamber today, have made a negative and destructive contribution to debate on, and discussion of, the draft CSI document and ‘A Shared Future’. They do that rather than take the opportunity to build on the start that has been made and make constructive suggestions, either in the consultation process, by written response or in the Chamber.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the junior Minister for his reply. He said that the draft document is out to consultation. However, given the almost unanimous denunciation that it does not contain anything solid, does the junior Minister acknowledge that the draft document is now unfit for purpose?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): Come on. Of the population of Northern Ireland, 290 people responded. I have already indicated from where I believe much of the political criticism comes. We will respond to those 290 people and take on board the points that they made. As the draft document is further developed, we will address those points as a theme.

Budget 2010

5. **Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress made by the Executive on the draft Budget.

(AQO 606/11)

The First Minister: As Members will be aware, the Executive have established a subgroup, which is known as the Budget review group, to examine the strategic issues that need to inform proposals for a draft Budget 2010.

The Budget review group continues to meet. It has discussed issues and, where necessary, commissioned further work on a wide range of relevant issues. Executive Ministers are also engaging bilaterally with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in discussions about the implications for their Departments of the budgetary constraints that we face.

It remains our objective to agree a draft Budget for presentation to the Assembly as soon as we are able to do so. It is essential that we maximise the resources available to us by every means possible. The group has, therefore, given particular attention to identifying options for raising additional revenue. Those are being examined at present. In that context, the Member will also be aware from our statement following the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting in domestic format on 22 November that we continue to press the UK Government on the integrity of their spending review settlement for Northern Ireland. We do not believe that that honours the commitments given to us by the previous Administration on capital expenditure, and we have obtained an undertaking that the figures underpinning the settlement will be re-examined. If an appropriately amended settlement is not forthcoming, we have made clear our intention to pursue that ultimately through the dispute mechanism available to us under the Joint Ministerial Committee memorandum of understanding.

Mr Frew: I welcome the First Minister's answer. When does he hope that the Budget can be agreed, given that the present uncertainty can have a negative impact on industry and on the retail sector in particular?

The First Minister: The Budgets for Scotland and Wales have been agreed within a structure that is much less complex than ours. There are five parties on our Executive, and we want to get the widest possible agreement on a Budget from them before bringing it to the Assembly. Therefore, our processes seek a high level of consensus before we bring the Budget to the Assembly.

I would like to see that done this week. Whether it will depend on the amount of work that each of our Ministers does with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the extent of engagement between the various parties to deal

with the outstanding issues. However, there is no question of our not having a Budget.

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires us to have the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance prepare a Budget under the authority of the Minister of that Department, if, within three days of the end of the financial year, a Budget has not been set. However, because of the consultation period and the time that it would need to go through the processes in this House, we would know early in January whether it was going to be possible to meet that level. Therefore, there will be a Budget.

It is not in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland that that route be taken, and not simply because it gives too much of a role and authority to the Finance Minister; but because it means that they will only be able to operate on the basis of 75% of the previous year's spend. People will be hurting enough without having to reduce to 75% of the previous year's spend.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister outline any new revenue streams that are being discussed by the Budget review group?

The First Minister: I am reluctant to do that because we have discussed a whole range of revenue streams, some of which I am pretty sure we will dismiss. I do not want to start chaos in the streets because of some of the possibilities that were put forward. We are looking at the viability of other revenue streams open to us; however, we have to recognise that the vast bulk of our Budget comes directly by way of a block grant. We can top it up through funds from Europe, through our regional rate, through income streams that each Department has or through any new revenue stream that we decide to use. We can have taxes, with the permission of Treasury, as long as they do not replicate taxes elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Mr Armstrong: Can the First Minister share his views with the House regarding the potential implications if the Executive fail to agree a Budget before Christmas?

The First Minister: Failing to agree a Budget before Christmas is not as dire as failing to agree one by the second week of January. By the second week of January, the Department of Finance and Personnel will have to prepare its

own Budget, which it will set at the lower level of 75% until the end of July, at which point it can move to 95% of the previous year's Budget. There is a clear downside if it is not done by mid-January.

If it is not done by Christmas, there will be a real difficulty for Departments. Taking the Member's party's interest, particularly in the Department of Health, trusts and the various arm's-length organisations need to know how much money they have in order to take their decisions.

Therefore everything falls behind. What is true of the Department of Health is true of every Department: all must work out their spending plans on the basis of their allocation. It is detrimental if that is not done by Christmas. If it is not done by mid-January, it will be to the detriment of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to the amount of money that is available to spend.

3.00 pm

Mr O'Loan: Is the First Minister aware that certain bodies that receive public funding already feel the need to discuss the possibility of putting their staff under protective notice? That is causing great apprehension among those staff. Can he reassure those organisations and their staff?

The First Minister: We are aware of that. Perhaps it is another aspect of the answer that I should have given to the Member for Mid Ulster. The protective notices would have to go out towards the end of December. Those organisations must guard themselves; they cannot go into a new financial year with a lower budget while continuing to pay at the same level. Therefore, it is extremely important that agreement be reached before Christmas.

I should point out that I have seen nothing in negotiations on the Budget that I did not see three and a half years ago when I was Minister of Finance. People want to agree a Budget, and there is serious engagement to that end. However, one never knows whether the Budget has been agreed until hands go up in an Executive meeting or in the Chamber. Agreement is essential, and we all carry responsibility for reaching it. We are elected to reach decisions, not to avoid them.

Justice

Mr Speaker: Questions 4, 8 and 14 have been withdrawn. Mr Cree is not in his place to ask question 1.

Police: Pensions

2. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice what action needs to be taken to address the problem of transferring police officers' pensions between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána.
(AQO 617/11)

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): As I remarked during the debate on the intergovernmental agreement, problems associated with the transfer of pensions between jurisdictions are not unique to the police. Questions that relate to the design of public sector pension schemes and matters that relate to the portability of pensions across national borders do not lie with the Department of Justice to resolve. For full transferability of pensions, both pension schemes would have to be broadly comparable. That would involve harmonising wider public sector pension policy and require renegotiation of police pay and conditions.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. We have looked at the issue on the Policing Board. It would be a complicated process. However, we have seen an absolute lack of urgency and political will to resolve the issue, which was a key Patten recommendation. I understand that major aspects of the matter are outside the Minister's remit; nevertheless, will he make its resolution a priority and ensure that greater political focus is brought to it?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I can make the matter a priority. Indeed, as I said earlier, I discussed the issue with Dermot Ahern at the meeting on the intergovernmental agreement, on which I reported this morning. As we appear to be in the business of rationalising all public sector pensions between the UK and Ireland and, indeed, possibly on an EU-wide basis, I am not sure whether we could necessarily solve that problem on our own, no matter how high a priority it might be for the Department of Justice.

Mr Spratt: I want to raise the issue of the transfer of pension funds with the Minister. No actual pension pot is held by either by the

PSNI or the Department. Will he bear in mind comments that were made in the earlier debate on the entire British police service and the role of pensions regulations in those matters?

The Minister of Justice: As I pointed out to the Member, pension arrangements are negotiated at UK level. That is why it is particularly difficult to look at any issue that relates solely to lateral transfers between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána.

Sir Reg Empey: Has the Minister reviewed arrangements for secondments between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána, given the recent lack of interest by officers on both sides of the border in participating in such secondments?

The Minister of Justice: No, I have not reviewed the specific arrangements for secondments, and it is certainly not my understanding that there is a lack of interest. There has been significant interest. Around 50 officers have moved on short-term secondments in each direction recently, and, as Members will know, a Garda superintendent is seven or eight months into a year's secondment to the PSNI. We are seeing significant interest in the short-term secondments, which, of course, is different from the subject of the original question, which was about full-scale lateral movement.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that it is beneficial to have regular exchange of policing personnel between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána? Is he taking any action to encourage that?

The Minister of Justice: I certainly believe that it is beneficial for police officers to experience life with the force on the other side of the border. As for encouragement, when I had the opportunity to speak at a Garda graduation ceremony at Templemore a few weeks ago, I said that, although I accepted that those new graduates would obviously be spending their first few years with the Garda Síochána, I hoped that many of them would apply for secondments to the PSNI in the near future. I make those points generally in the opportunities that I have.

Criminal Justice: Time Limits

3. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Justice, given the endemic problem of delays in the

criminal justice system, if he will consider the introduction of statutory time limits for processing cases. (AQO 618/11)

The Minister of Justice: I am absolutely determined to reduce the time that it takes the criminal justice system to process criminal cases, and I am driving forward a comprehensive programme of work to speed up justice. That includes measures designed to improve how filed cases are prepared and how cases are processed through the courts. As well as reducing avoidable delays, I want to ensure that we provide a better service, especially to victims of crime.

I have no plans at present to introduce statutory time limits, but I have already said publicly that that is an option that I could return to if the current reforms fail to deliver the step change that we all agree is required. The success of the initiatives now under way will be measured against new, locally founded performance standards. Those are being developed and will, for the first time, allow for an end-to-end measurement of the performance of the whole system. Those new standards will be underpinned by specific targets for each of the criminal justice organisations to reduce the time that it takes for cases to get to court.

Speeding up justice was one of the main topics that I brought to the inaugural meeting of the new criminal justice delivery group, which I chaired last week, and it will be discussed when the Criminal Justice Board meets later this week. The Member can therefore be assured that tackling avoidable delays remains at the top of our agenda.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. Is it not the case that victims in particular are under serious stress and trauma as a result of crime and it is much more worrying when the time frame is extended? Will the Minister consider the immediate introduction of legislation to allow time-framed execution in preparing those cases, as was envisaged under direct rule?

The Minister of Justice: The Member makes an entirely valid point about the needs of victims and witnesses in assuring that justice is delivered in a speedy way. However, there would be serious difficulties in moving to statutory time limits before the system is ready, given that we have acknowledged in the Chamber on a number of occasions the problems with

establishing joined-up arrangements between the different agencies. We need to ensure that the system works as efficiently as possible. At that stage, it may be necessary to re-examine the question of statutory limits, but I do not believe that the needs of victims would be served by a premature introduction of statutory limits, resulting in people being released who should not be released.

Lord Morrow: The Minister is not taking this very seriously, is he? He tells us that he has no statutory time limit, but surely the one thing that is coming across is that that is the very thing that is needed. Can he not assure the House today that he will change his mind on that, apply his mind to it and come to the House at a later date with a time limit? That is essential if we are to get things moving.

The Minister of Justice: I can only repeat what I have just said to Mr Ramsey: I am prepared to accept that there may be an appropriate role for statutory time limits when we have reached the situation where the system is seen to be functioning well. I can imagine what would be said by Lord Morrow and perhaps by other Members if we introduced statutory time limits prematurely and saw serious offenders released who should not be released because of the implementation of statutory time limits at this stage.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the whole issue of avoidable delays, we are working under the presumption that people are innocent until proven otherwise. Setting that aside, will the Minister tell the House what actions his Department has taken on the basis of Dr Michael Maguire's report on avoidable delays? What lessons have we learnt from that report?

The Minister of Justice: I can assure the Member that actions have been taken. First of all, there are proposals in the Justice Bill on things like fixed penalties and prosecutorial summonses that will speed the system up significantly and allow for more concentration on serious cases. Secondly, one of the first actions that I took as Minister was to meet the Criminal Justice Board to look at the overall operation of the system and emphasise the need to speed up arrangements. Thirdly, as I have just said, there is the delivery group that I have set up to ensure that at the highest level — the Chief Constable and the Director of Public

Prosecutions — we address the issues and the responsible agencies are seen to work together. We had an extremely profitable meeting last week and set arrangements for future meetings that will ensure that the Criminal Justice Board keeps focusing on the issue of delay. It causes considerable concern and needs to be addressed. I have been emphasising that during the time that I have been in post. We are seeing some improvements, but we need to see a lot more.

Mr McNarry: If the Minister were to, in his own words, re-examine the option to introduce these time limits, how would he ensure that they were enforced?

The Minister of Justice: It would be for the House to frame the legislation for statutory limits in a way that made it clear that they were to be enforced. That is why, while I am certainly not ruling out the option, I am looking at how we get the system speeded up first of all. There would be serious problems if we had statutory time limits in advance of seeing the system work. CJINI has recognised that there are issues with the current operation of the system. It has not been calling for an early and instant introduction of limits, but the matter will be kept under review.

Ms Lo: There has been a lot of publicity lately around delays caused by difficulties in the interface between the PSNI and the PPS. Can the Minister assure the Assembly that steps are being taken to address these difficulties?

The Minister of Justice: I can certainly assure my colleague that steps are being taken. There is no doubt that what we saw a year or two ago was significant difficulty in the way that papers were passed from the police to the PPS and the PPS responded. Last week, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Chief Constable were part of the delivery group that I convened, working together to see how the agencies could respond to each other's needs and improve the system between them, rather than developing what would otherwise have been the potential blame culture between different agencies. That is a significant example of joined-up working that is now happening. I will certainly do my best as Minister to ensure that that continues to be the case and that we do not end up with agencies fighting each other. The only target that really matters to the victim of a crime is the total time taken from when the crime is

committed to its being disposed of in court. That is the target that we should all be working towards.

Violent Crime

5. Lord Browne asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to reduce the number of violent crimes. (AQO 620/11)

The Minister of Justice: One of my Department's key objectives in the Programme for Government is, by March 2011, to reduce the number of non-domestic violence-with-injury crimes by 5%, from a baseline of 11,432 in 2009-2010. The latest monthly figures, from April to September, show an average reduction of 8% against the same month the year before, and we are therefore on track to meet this target.

Reducing violent crime has been identified as a priority by the Policing Board and by the Chief Constable in the 2011-13 policing plan. It is also consistent with the Chief Constable's strategic priority of addressing issues of serious harm. The Chief Constable has initiated measures to address violent crime, including the assignment of violent crime lead officers in each district. The PSNI decides on priorities locally and addresses them accordingly.

In addition, the Department supports the delivery of the You, Your Child and Alcohol campaign. It addresses youth alcohol misuse, which can have an impact on violent behaviour. In partnership with CSPs and DPPs, the Department also supports the Get Home Safe campaign.

3.15 pm

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his answer, but does he agree that the most important part of any strategy against violent crime should be trying to ensure that such crimes are prevented from occurring in the first place? Incarceration has been consistently shown to be ineffectual in preventing offending, so will the Minister give some specific examples of what his Department is doing to investigate alternative deterrents to violent crime?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his supplementary question, which was not the one that I was expecting. I was perhaps expecting it from another side of the House, but not from that side.

Let me repeat the statistics: so far this year, we have witnessed a reduction of 8% against a target of 5%, so the improvement is significant. I entirely agree that the strategy needs to look at stopping crimes from happening in the first place, rather than on merely dealing with them. That is why the key figure is the reduction in the number of crimes. I am always happy to agree with members of the DUP when they talk about the ineffectiveness of incarceration. The probation service and the Youth Justice Agency are doing positive work in this community to find alternative means of ensuring that wrongdoers are punished and led away from a further cycle of wrongdoing. I am delighted to see that those methods tend to be more effective at reducing further recidivism on the part of those who committed offences in the first place, and I am delighted to hear such support from the House this afternoon.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister comment on any plans he may have to change the way in which non-molestation orders and similar orders are processed between the Northern Ireland courts, the tribunals service and the PSNI?

The Minister of Justice: I am always amazed at the breadth of the supplementary questions that Members manage to ask. I have already highlighted the work that is being done to look at the opportunities to ensure that people can proceed immediately to obtaining legal aid for non-molestation orders with assessments being done subsequently, rather than their having to go through the full assessment to ascertain whether they can obtain legal aid. Such a process would mean that those who end up having to pay their own charges would pay them at a lower level because they are in the legal aid scheme. I believe that that should be key to improving opportunities for those who are the victims of such activities, and I know that the House would expect non-molestation orders to be obtained as easily as possible and to be made as effective as possible.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the prospect of detection is an important deterrent where violent crime is concerned? Will he tell us what steps are being taken to improve detection rates across the region?

The Minister of Justice: Although I thank the Member and agree that detection is the ultimate deterrent, I think that the issue of how detection

rates are being improved is a matter that is rather more an operational responsibility of the Chief Constable than one for the Minister reporting to the Assembly to discuss.

Youth Justice Review

6. Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Justice to outline the timescale for delivering the youth justice review and if he can confirm that the review team will be fully independent.

(AQO 621/11)

The Minister of Justice: Members will be aware that I announced the composition, terms of reference and timescale for the review of youth justice on 1 November. Following further representations made to and by the Justice Committee, I sought advice from the review team about these matters. In response to the team's advice, I wrote last week to the Chairperson of the Justice Committee to inform him of changes I have since made to both the composition of and timescale for that review.

Kathleen Marshall, a children's rights lawyer and former Children's Commissioner in Scotland, has joined the review team. The expertise that she brings to the review will contribute to addressing the international obligations context set by the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. In addition, the timescale for the review has been extended, and the team has now been asked to report in June 2011. I have taken those steps to copper-fasten the independence of the review and to respond to the team's considered request for additional time to undertake the work.

Kathleen Marshall will replace Paula Jack on the review team, but Paula will still be available to assist it in an advisory capacity. The actions that I have taken further underline my commitment to ensuring the clear and unambiguous independence of this important review and the delivery of an effective outcome.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's response. I am certain that it was not a pre-emptive strike against my question. Is he now satisfied that the review team and its terms of reference are sufficiently independent to ensure that an entirely satisfactory report will be produced?

The Minister of Justice: I believed that the review as announced would have been independent and entirely satisfactory and that, as the Committee has a responsibility to advise and assist the Minister, it was incumbent on

the Minister to listen to what it said. That was why I consulted the review team on how it saw the operation of the review. On the basis of its advice, I made the changes that I have just announced. I did not do so as a pre-emptive strike against Mr Dallat; it was something that was already under way. However, his question coincided neatly and gave me the opportunity to announce it to the Assembly.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. We welcome the fact that he listened to the Committee's view on some of the personnel changes and on the time in which the review will take place. Now that the review will be longer, will he use the opportunity to look at the terms of reference to ensure that they are as comprehensive as they should be?

The Minister of Justice: I was almost going to say that I thank the Member for his supplementary. Having been invited by the review team to change the timescale and precise composition, I am now being asked to change its terms of reference. When I made the announcement on 1 November, I stated that I believed that the terms of reference were wide enough to encompass anything that needed to be encompassed within a full and comprehensive review. I also stated that I was open to requests from the review team to change those. Although I have made some changes at its request, it has made no request, at this stage, for changes to the terms of reference.

Mr Campbell: The Minister announced some changes to the line-up of the review panel and mentioned that a former member will be retained in an advisory capacity. Will those changes result in any significant addition to the cost of the review?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Campbell for highlighting what is probably the one slightly gloomy point. Given that there are now three, rather than two, members of the review team who are not employees of the Department or its agencies, there will, inevitably, be some modest increase in the cost of the review. I am not sure how much the complete increase to the cost is, but I advise the House that the current budget that has been set for the review, including all administrative costs as well as the cost of the members, is £75,000.

Dr Farry: I commend the Minister for showing a degree of flexibility in the matter that would not have been shown under direct rule. Will he confirm that the terms of reference for the review are not merely consistent with the Hillsborough agreement but, in fact, go beyond it? Will he also confirm that the important issues that we have already discussed, such as the speed of justice, are critical to the future of youth justice?

The Minister of Justice: I thank my colleague for his praise, although I am reminded of the occasion on which the First Minister said that I could not be any worse as a Justice Minister than Paul Goggins. That was not much of a compliment, but I am sure that today's reference was meant as such. I confirm that the terms of reference that I set for the review were wider than those that were specified in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. As I said earlier, I am willing to widen them further if that is regarded as appropriate and necessary.

Mr Savage: Are there any aspects of the youth justice systems in England and Wales or even in Scotland that the Minister would like to see in our youth justice system here in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Justice: I have already reported to the House that, as far as England and Wales are concerned, it has been more a matter of officials and, most recently, a Minister from the Ministry of Justice coming to observe the operation of our Youth Justice Agency to learn lessons from Northern Ireland for the benefit of England and Wales. I suspect that some lessons could be learned from the operation of the Scottish children's panel system, but the key point about having an independent review is not that I stand up in the House and suggest what might be best but that we get a thorough and professional examination of what is best for Northern Ireland for the future.

Young Offenders

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of whether working with families of young people at risk of offending can prevent young people from coming to the attention of the Youth Justice Agency.

(AQO 622/11)

The Minister of Justice: There is good evidence that working with the families of young people

who are at risk of offending is beneficial and can divert them from offending behaviour. It is clearly better that such support is provided well before children who are at risk of future offending come into contact with the criminal justice system.

I recognise the fact that work undertaken by agencies across government with children and their families is successful in directing young people away from pathways that lead to offending. However, I believe that more can be done to ensure a joined-up approach across government in that area. To that end, I held bilateral discussions with ministerial colleagues on how we can develop a coherent, government-wide approach to reducing offending. When young people become known to the criminal justice system, the Youth Justice Agency plays a crucial role in helping them to address their offending behaviour and to avoid further offending. When seeking to divert those young people from offending, the agency works directly with them and their families in the community.

Mr Beggs: I understand that some funding of children's issues is at risk and that support for parenting programmes and so on could result in greater numbers of children and young people entering the criminal justice system. Will the Minister ensure that all Departments work together more closely and are aware of the ramifications if inappropriate decisions are made?

The Minister of Justice: I certainly take the Member's point seriously. However, I am not sure whether I have the power to ensure that other Departments co-operate with my Department. Nevertheless, I am seeking to co-operate, because I recognise fully that much of the useful preventative work is done by, in particular, health and social care agencies and the Youth Service. Consequently, there is a clear need for joined-up government in that area. However, we cannot do it entirely on our own.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister agree that, to prevent young people from coming into the youth justice services, there is a need properly to resource family and childcare social work, which has historically experienced difficulties as a result of being understaffed and under-resourced? Later offending will be stopped only by resourcing family and childcare social workers who are on the front line dealing with

children on the child protection register and other matters in preventative services.

The Minister of Justice: Mr Speaker, of course you would expect one social worker to agree with another about the necessity of that. However, speaking as the Minister of Justice, I am not sure that I should do too much to inflate the budget claims of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr A Maginness: Given the good work carried out by the Probation Board, is the Minister certain that it is receiving sufficient resources to maintain the high level of success that it has achieved in dealing with young offenders? Compared with other institutions, it has achieved a very low rate of reoffending.

The Minister of Justice: The Member makes an extremely serious point. There is absolutely no doubt that the Probation Board is extremely effective in its work, and I have no doubt that it will continue to claim that it receives less funding than comparable services across these islands. That said, we are all aware of the precise financial circumstances we are in at the moment. Therefore, I am determined to ensure that we get the best value for money from the Department of Justice budget when it is allocated. Unfortunately, that cannot mean protection for any particular agency, but it does mean that we must ensure that we use money where it is most effective.

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

Victims of Crime

10. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the consultation on the code of practice for victims of crime. (AQO 625/11)

The Minister of Justice: I launched the consultation on a code of practice for victims of crime on 21 October, during a keynote speech at the Victim Support Northern Ireland annual conference, fulfilling the commitment given in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement that a new code of practice for victims should be developed. The new code is part of our extensive programme of work to improve the way in which the criminal justice system engages with victims. It builds on what we have achieved since devolution, including the production of two new guides to the justice system, which are

now being used widely. The new code will set out clearly how the legitimate expectations of victims will be met by statutory and voluntary agencies working in partnership. I want to produce a document that supports victims and makes their entitlements clear.

The consultation is important, and I encourage all those who work with victims, those who have been victims and those with an interest in victims' issues, including Members, to examine the proposals and give us their views. The closing date for responses to the consultation is 14 January 2011. I have instructed my officials to engage proactively with groups that work with victims and to ensure that their views are taken on board.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his detailed response. Will he outline how that initiative will fit alongside the measures that he has already taken to improve the services offered to victims of crime?

3.30 pm

The Minister of Justice: A number of different measures run together in that respect. The code of practice will codify a standard of service that victims and witnesses can expect, but that is only one of 23 actions in the strategic action plan for victims and witnesses for this year. There are also proposals in the Justice Bill, which is before the Committee for Justice, that would improve services for victims, such as raising the age limit for special measures for witnesses in court from 17 to 18; giving young witnesses a greater say in how they give their evidence; giving victims of sexual offences the right to give evidence by video link; putting on a statutory footing the use of supporters through video links; and improving the role of interpreters. All those are issues that, taken with the Bill, the code of practice and the guides that have been published, can make matters significantly better for victims of crime.

Civil Law Reform

11. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Justice whether he has had any discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about civil law reform. (AQO 626/11)

The Minister of Justice: Civil law reform was one of the matters that I discussed with the Minister of Finance and Personnel when I met him last week. Work is ongoing at official level

on the transfer of responsibility for civil law from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to the Department of Justice. That will include work on policy for the regulation of the legal professions; private family law; trusts; and tort and contract law. It will not include land law, which will stay with DFP, given its wider responsibilities for Land and Property Services. Discussions have been focusing on the necessary issues of resources and staff transfer. Good progress is being made, but the transfer will need to have Executive agreement in order to be implemented.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time. I ask the House to take its ease until we move to the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Specialist Neurology Beds

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr G Robinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the cut in specialist neurology beds at the Royal Victoria Hospital; acknowledges that the Belfast neurology unit is a facility for all of Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that the beds are reinstated so that patients with neurological conditions have equal access to specialist treatment.

First, I pay tribute to and welcome to the Public Gallery the representatives of various charities that work with people affected by neurological conditions and their families. Their work is invaluable and it must be acknowledged and praised. In proposing the motion, I am in no way minimising the excellent work done by other agencies in our Health Service. I salute them all.

Without any consultation with other trusts, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has reduced the number of specialist neurology beds from 23 to 15, which represents a cut of around 35%. That cut has had a devastating impact on a specialist service that was already struggling to cope with inadequate facilities. There are some 35,000 patients with a significant neurological disability in Northern Ireland, but there are only 17 neurologists in post to look after them. I would like Members to listen carefully to the approximate figures that I am about to quote. There are 4,000 patients with multiple sclerosis (MS), 4,000 patients with Parkinson's disease, 100-plus patients with motor neurone disease, and 600 patients at risk of having Huntington's disease. In Northern Ireland each year, there are 8,500 stroke victims, who may suffer neurological damage, and 17,000 patients with epilepsy. That is not an exhaustive list of the neurological conditions that Northern Ireland neurologists deal with, but it gives an idea of the numbers of patients who

are affected by the loss of specialist beds from the neurology unit. Members must remember that that specialist unit is for the whole of Northern Ireland and is not just a facility for the Belfast area. The Minister has not recognised this in some of his answers to my written questions.

Mr Buchanan: Does the Member agree that the Minister's written response to my concerns about the cut in the number of neurology beds, which he said is a matter for the Belfast Trust and not for his Department, represents the Minister passing the buck? He is taking no interest in that huge issue, which will affect patients across Northern Ireland. That is totally irresponsible of the Health Minister, and, with the Member, I call on him to reinstate those beds as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr G Robinson: I agree entirely with my colleague. The loss of beds affects the whole of Northern Ireland, not just Belfast.

Many conditions that neurologists deal with are obscure. I have a personal interest in epilepsy and, when possible, have helped Epilepsy Action closely over the past few years. As I stated earlier, 17,000 people in Northern Ireland have epilepsy, and there are three epilepsy specialist neurologists for Northern Ireland. That equates to roughly 5,600 patients for each specialist neurologist. Those numbers relate to epilepsy only. All the other neurological conditions suffer the same minimal service provision. Given that the beds that are dedicated to neurology have been cut by one third, the service will not be adequate and will leave neurology patients without proper diagnosis and treatment.

A facility that provides Province-wide specialist services with so few beds does not meet the expectations of patients and will leave some of them with a quality of life that is lower than should be expected. It also hinders the valued staff in doing their specialised and dedicated job. I pay special tribute to the excellent work that those people do. The unit may be in the Belfast Trust area, but it serves all of Northern Ireland. As the facility at the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) is Northern Ireland-wide, I sincerely hope that the Minister can intervene to provide such a specialised service. More than 40% of people with disabilities have a neurological symptom, and 10% of all

attendances with a GP are for a neurological symptom. Those figures show the importance of neurology provision. That is the reality, and the loss of beds will impact adversely on patient outcomes. That is not acceptable.

I hope that all Members appreciate the need to support neurology services in Northern Ireland and their huge benefit to individuals and families and will, therefore, support this very worthwhile motion on a cross-party basis.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. In 2009, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that his Department was developing a strategy for physical and sensory disability services. He also said that there may be an opportunity to co-ordinate services regionally to provide the basis upon which to develop patient-centred services. In April 2010, he announced a £50,000 funding boost for neuro-physiotherapy services to set up a regional network to improve services for those who suffer from conditions such as multiple sclerosis. The Minister said that those were welcoming and meaningful statistics in the development of a network that will result in better services for people with neurological disease.

Almost 45,000 people in the North live with a neurological condition, and the Neurological Alliance has outlined its concern that a 30% reduction in the number of acute regional neurology beds should have been taken in consultation with stakeholders. It also stated that a greater proportion of patients will be exposed to overcrowded six-bedded wards on ward 4E at the RVH. The essential numbers of critical care beds are not in place, and people who require emergency admission will be unable to access specialist neurological care when needed. The reduction in the number of beds will increase waiting times for planned admissions.

As was alluded, in answer to a number of Assembly questions, the Minister has stated repeatedly that the delivery of services at the RVH is a matter for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, as the service provider. He has also said that the trust is engaged in a programme of modernisation in the neurology service. The programme includes a review of current neurology services, patient pathway models and bed utilisation. If the RVH is a regional centre, perhaps the Minister can tell us

whether it is getting additional money to provide that service. If the decision has been taken that the RVH will provide a regional service, other areas should have been included in that decision.

When the Minister was asked by the Chairperson of the Health Committee whether hospitals and service users outside the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust were consulted about the decision to reduce the number of beds that are available in the acute neurological unit at the RVH, he did not give a direct answer. The RVH is the centre for neurological services for the whole of the North, so it does not seem unreasonable that other stakeholders should have been consulted, but there is no real evidence that that happened. Here in the North, we have some of the highest levels of neurological conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, in the world. For instance, up to 25 years ago, it was documented by the Mayo Clinic in America that my constituency of Newry and Armagh has some of the highest statistics for people suffering from multiple sclerosis and other neurological conditions.

It is essential that we have a neurological service that is effective and has the capacity to deal with the number of patients who require its services. Reducing the number of specialist neurology beds does not seem to be the answer, and the Minister needs to address that issue urgently.

I am sure that all Members have received lobbying letters from people who suffer from conditions such as brain tumours and who are worried that the cutbacks will affect the treatment that they receive. Those people suffer from serious conditions, and they really do not need the stress and trauma that the cutbacks will impose upon them. I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: Neurology is an important aspect of medicine, and it is responsible for one in five hospital admissions. It is also why between 10% and 15% of people consult their GP in the first place. In addition, around 16,000 people attend neurology outpatient clinics. I understand that new outpatients experience a waiting time of 13 weeks and that inpatients experience a similar waiting time. Waiting times are, of course, a direct result of the number of staff who are available, and that is a direct consequence of the amount of finance that is available. I pay

tribute to the staff who deal with patients with such complaints.

The financial reality underpinning all this is that the Belfast Trust's budget has been reduced by £112 million over the three-year comprehensive spending review period. In short, the trust has had to find 11% efficiencies in a staged process over three years under the comprehensive spending review, yet a nursing bed in hospitals costs between £25,000 and £40,000, according to how dependent the patient is. I understand that, to meet the need in the facility for the whole of Northern Ireland, there are 8.5 full-time-equivalent neurologists in Belfast, supported by others. In addition, there are two consultant neurologists at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, one at Antrim Area Hospital, two at Craigavon Area Hospital and two at the Ulster Hospital. They work in close co-operation across the region.

We are back in familiar territory with this latest debate. There is a demand for service improvements at a time of budget cuts. To be fair, that is a difficult problem, because there is a limit to the staff numbers and operational efficiencies that can realistically be achieved.

3.45 pm

At a certain point, the amount of funding available will impact directly on waiting times. Other factors that govern the operation of a hospital unit are the sheer geography of where beds are located and the infection control regulations in that hospital. I understand that significant advances have been made in handling outpatients through far faster turnaround times. Efficiencies have also been made through flexible bed management for inpatients. There will, therefore, be limits on future efficiency gains.

In conclusion, enormous pressure has been put on the Health Minister to cut his budget. Therefore, perhaps the movers of the motion, who are members of the same party as the Finance Minister, should consider their motion the next time they hear about health cuts.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion. I reiterate my party's position on this matter, which is to call on the Minister to reverse the decision to cut the number of beds, because that is the only sensible decision to be taken. Before the decision was made to cut the number of beds from 23 to 16, which is a 30% reduction, many

patients were already facing difficulties and delays in assessment, treatment or diagnosis. Strangely, despite that, and despite the fact that the service is a regional one for all the people of Northern Ireland, the decision was taken without consulting any other trusts, clinicians or the public. The Belfast Trust is guilty of a serious failure in that regard. It failed to consult on a key service. It also tried to tell the Committee that its decision was for the best and that it would improve the service and make it slicker. Clearly, the trust has acted in a high-handed manner, which is worrying for patients, carers and families.

Mr Easton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I am afraid of losing time, so I will just keep going.

It is also worrying for us as elected representatives, because we are answerable and accountable to people.

Given the decision to cut the number of beds by 30%, let us consider the situation as regards neurology patients at the Royal Victoria Hospital just over a week ago. Not only were the 16 neurology beds full, nine neurosurgical beds were occupied by neurology patients, and two further neurology patients were in ward 7. Twenty-seven beds were, therefore, being used for neurology patients. I also understand that at least half a dozen other patients were waiting urgently for treatment but could not be accommodated. Therefore, quite clearly, the decision has to be reversed.

Some Members will be aware that the trust tried to advise the Health Committee that everything to do with the service was all right and that Committee members had nothing to worry about. The trust said that this was modernisation. We were also told by one of the witnesses that it would improve the flow of patients by reducing the length of bed stays. Perhaps the Minister will comment on the logic behind the claim that the flow of patients will improve if the number of beds are reduced. That does not stand up, and it raises questions.

There are also questions about how the decision was reached. I have already said that there was no consultation. In addition, the Belfast Trust told the Committee that one reason for the decision was that it was doing some work with the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement. At the next

Committee meeting, there was a letter from the chief executive of the trust saying that it was working with this institute but that the work was ongoing. Will the Minister explain how the trust took the decision when the work with the institute was incomplete?

Ulster Unionist Party Member Sam Gardiner referred to financial difficulties, but the clinicians in the Belfast Trust were told that it was based on finance. Those of us who are members of the Health Committee will recall that we were told that it was due to modernisation. It cannot be both, so there is a simple question to be answered: which is it? Which version do we believe?

There is only one thing to do —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Gallagher: — and that is to reverse the decision. I call on the Minister, further to this debate today, to do just that.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion, and I pay tribute to the staff who are working in the unit and to the people with this condition. In Northern Ireland, 48,000 people, all of whom use this excellent facility at the Royal Hospital, suffer from a neurological condition, including those with brain injuries; stroke victims; people with dementia; MS and ME sufferers; those with Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease, motor neurone disease and epilepsy; and those with the rare condition trigeminal neuralgia.

It stands to reason that a reduction in beds will bring concern for patients and for the capacity of the service. That concern is shared by consultants who work at the unit also. Consultants have raised concerns with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust about the potential impact of the cut on an already-stretched facility. As other Members have said, the fact that these reductions were carried out without any consultation with the experts working in the department is of deep concern.

We are all interested in our Health Service delivering efficiency, but concern must be expressed when services are cut in this way. It appears to me that we are placing excessive emphasis on what trusts do in GB rather than focusing on the best outcomes for our patients locally. There is real concern among patients and families about the lack of privacy, dignity,

safety and infection control that may arise as a result of this cut and that emergency admissions will be unable to access specialist neurological care when urgently needed.

I welcome the fact that £50,000, which was used to set up a regional network that includes neuro-psychotherapists and nurse specialists who are experts in dealing with these long-term conditions, was invested in the services during the early part of this year. However, if patients cannot get a bed on admission, how can they access this improved level of care?

I have noted the submission of Ms Donnelly to the Health Committee, as stated, in which she promoted that the beds that were closed were not in the main neurology ward and that some had been re-designated as stroke beds. She also promoted the financial savings as a result of this so-called modernisation. However, we must never allow this to put primary patient care at risk.

Mr Easton: I am in favour of the motion, and I thank my party colleagues for tabling it. The mind boggles as to why these specialist beds have been withdrawn. In April, the Minister gave a token gesture of £50,000 towards developing neurological services and the set up of a regional network to improve services for patients suffering from conditions such as multiple sclerosis.

In March 2009, the Minister committed himself to improving services for people with neurological conditions. He told the House that his Department was developing a strategy for physical and sensory disability services. He said that this strategy would consider neurological disabilities, including neuromuscular disabilities.

In reply to a question from the Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness on any possible reduction in the number of beds in the RVH, the Minister said:

"The Trust is currently engaged in a programme of modernisation within the neurology service and this includes a review of bed utilisation. As a result, the Trust has reduced the number of neurology beds from 23 to 16 in October 2010, thereby bringing the neurology service into line with comparable peers in other parts of the UK."

The Minister admitted not having intervened in that issue and stated that he had:

"not personally had any discussions with the Belfast Trust about the reduction in the number of neurological beds."

Will the Minister inform the House whether there have been any discussions with the trust on that issue since 21 October? I ask the House to tell me, through the Deputy Speaker and the Minister, what price we can put on a person's care and well-being when deciding whether to make cuts in bed numbers.

Mr Craig: Cuts in neurological beds amount to approximately £200,000 a year in savings, yet the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust employs 798 people on salaries of between £50,000 and £100,000, with a total wage bill of between £40 million and £80 million a year. Surely the trust could have found savings of £200,000 in such a colossal wage bill, which is, after all, for middle management. It is also disgraceful that the trust did not consult other the boards, because it has plenty of middle managers to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is debating management structures and pay bands at the moment. It has discovered that there are huge numbers of managers, and it needs to undertake further investigation.

One who is in need of neurological surgery needs specialist care and treatment. I am concerned about the effect that removing beds will have on patients, and I am not confident that the trust can justify the cuts. The trust admitted to the Committee that it has no other choice but to reduce bed numbers, yet it also told the Committee that it puts patients first.

I was not convinced by the reasons put forward by the representatives of the trust at the Committee's meeting on 14 October 2010. They continually played on the word "modernisation," yet admitted that the decision to remove seven of the 23 beds was down to money. Therefore, there seems to be confusion about what it was down to. I understand that we are living in difficult times, but I am worried about unjustified cuts.

Staff are employed in the management of the Health Service who are not healthcare workers but who, as my colleague Mr Craig mentioned,

earn between £50,000 and £100,000 a year. The savings produced by cutting the number of beds was put at approximately £210,000 a year, and I must ask whether patients and their need for constant care, treatment and support or the salary of a member of the management team is more important. The management is responsible for cutting the number of beds, and the mind boggles at the level and cost of management in the Health Service in Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I, too, support the motion. There is no point in going over all the facts and figures. Everyone seems to be aware of the issue and the impact that the reduction from 23 to 16 beds will have. That is probably most true of the consultants who wrote to the trust outlining their fears that the closure of beds will stretch further an already stretched service.

The lack of consultation has been highlighted. The decision was made that, on 1 October, there would be a dramatic one-third reduction in the number of beds, and there was little or no consultation with anyone outside the Belfast Trust.

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that when the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety took evidence from the trust, there seemed to be a serious disagreement between the neurological consultant and the management of the trust and that it was clear that the specialist was upset at the cuts?

4.00 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank the Member for his intervention. At that meeting of 14 October, it was evident that there was a definite disagreement about the way in which the cuts had been brought forward.

We have to support bringing back the beds, because, according to the calculations of the Royal College of Physicians and the Association of British Neurologists, neurology beds are drastically under-resourced. Jonathan Craig mentioned that savings could be made, and there are areas in which savings must be made. However, neurology is not an area in which to seek cuts or try to tinker around the edges. At the end of the day, the issue is one of closing beds that are already being provided in a hospital.

We invest money in treating people in a specialist unit where they will receive first-rate

care. However, we understand from what other Members said that some neurology patients are now being treated in general wards. Tommy Gallagher said that a number of patients are in ward 7, which, I understand, is a general ward. I am not suggesting that they do not receive proper treatment there, but the specialist treatment that they would receive in a neurology unit would be of the appropriate standard to deal with their conditions.

Given that the Belfast Trust was providing neurology services not only within its own area but to the whole Province, we have no alternative but to ask the Minister to revisit the decision. The Belfast Trust should have engaged with every other trust on the matter, and the Health Department should have taken the lead on how it moved forward. The Minister cannot wash his hands of the fact that he and the Department should have been giving direction. At the end of the day, he will be the one to suffer for not doing that. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I thought that Mr Girvan was going to widen the debate and say that the entire health budget was “drastically under-resourced” — I think that he used that phrase. Had he done so, I would have concurred with him. I am sure that the Minister will give us the figures to show that our Health Service is more than £600 million behind the equivalent services in the rest of the country.

Neurological conditions have a huge impact on those who suffer from them, their families and their carers. I pay tribute to all the groups that represent such individuals and families and provide the support that many of them need. They have a tremendous impact on the lives of sufferers and their families.

Members and colleagues from the Health Committee spoke about the delivery of services and the Belfast Trust's decision to cut beds. I agree with the observation that Mr Easton made during his intervention. Neither the Belfast Trust's handling of the decision nor its performance in front of the Health Committee provided any comfort or confidence that alternative service arrangements were in hand. The people within the team who presented evidence sent out different messages. That was worrying, and it is probably the main reason why the debate is taking place today. We want to find out the facts behind that presentation to the Health Committee.

There were concerns about the reduction in beds from 23 to 18, and then a further two beds were moved to stroke services. The trust made the case that the reduction would not limit care. I urge the Minister to stay in close contact with the trust to make sure that the reduction does not have any detrimental impact on care, on those who depend on the service, or on their families.

I am quite confident that the Minister will do that as this new system goes forward, to make sure that the necessary support and services are put in place and kept there. After all, we have to focus on the outcomes. What provides the best outcomes for the patients for whom we seek to provide care? The outcomes should be the best. We want to see no reduction in the quality of outcome for each patient.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome the opportunity to talk about regional services for those suffering from neurological conditions. I will begin by explaining what is meant by the term “neurological conditions”. They are the most common causes of serious disabilities and have a major but often unrecognised impact on health and social services. Neurological conditions can include Parkinson’s disease, Huntington’s disease, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, motor neurone disease, spina bifida, stroke, brain injury, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, and so on. It is a long list that covers some very challenging conditions.

The specialist neurology unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital is a key part of a network of the neurology services for Northern Ireland. The unit sits at the centre of a service that extends out to other hospitals across the Province. It is a service providing diagnosis, care and support for a wide range of conditions. Last year, over 31,000 people were seen at neurology outpatient services and 1,303 patients were admitted for specialist neurology work as day-case patients or inpatients. People with a neurological condition may also be treated by general physicians or care-of-the-elderly physicians, either on an outpatient or an inpatient basis. In addition, there is an important role for the patient’s GP and others, including allied health professionals such as physiotherapists.

The reason why we are here today is to discuss the recent reduction in beds in the

specialist neurology service in the Royal Victoria Hospital. The delivery of services at the Royal is, of course, a matter for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, since it is the service provider. It is responsible for providing the regional service, and that is why it is the trust’s responsibility. Had it decided to reduce the service, that would have been a different matter, and I will elaborate on that now, but the trust is confident that it will continue to provide the service that it is responsible for.

Mr Wells: If the Belfast Trust was providing a regional service and carrying out a reconfiguration — let us not call it a reduction, but a major change to how that service is delivered — why did it not consult the other four trusts that depend on that? I have met the chief executive of three of those trusts and they were not consulted in any shape or form about the major change to that service.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The trust is responsible for providing a regional service. It will continue to provide the regional service at the same level as it had been providing it. Had it decided that it was going to reduce that service, it would have been required to go to the other trust, but the other trust will receive exactly the same service. That is its assurance.

The trust has advised me that the reduction came about following a programme of modernisation within the neurology service. The key aim of that work is to provide safe, high-quality, effective care in a more efficient, responsive and flexible way. The trust assessed the provision of services at the Royal. A key element was looking at comparable neurological units in other parts of the UK so as to benchmark the services here with practice elsewhere.

Members will be aware that they have pressed me constantly over three and a half years to be more efficient. Although the unit in the Royal offers high quality clinical care, it appears that patients stay longer than in other areas of the UK. Also, patients who elsewhere may be managed on an outpatient or day-case basis may be more likely to be admitted in Belfast. The aim must be to improve the local services with a view to reducing the length of time that patients spend in hospital. That has meant looking at pathways of care for patients to ensure that there is quick and appropriate diagnosis and effective treatment so that

patients stay in hospital only for as long as necessary.

An important element in that is the use of a ward sister to clinically co-ordinate the admission and discharge of patients. She will accurately schedule inpatient activity with the neurological service to ensure that there are no delays either pre- or post-assessment. That will improve the movement of patients within the hospital and provide the most timely interventions and treatment. The trust will also ensure the provision of services on a day-case basis and outpatient basis in preference to inpatient stays, where appropriate.

I have been absolutely assured by the trust that the reduction in beds will not impact on patient care. In fact, I have been advised that, since the change, not all beds are full, because services are provided to patients on an outpatient basis. That is despite Mr Gallagher's understanding, and I would be interested to know what that understanding is. If he will communicate it to me, or even write to me, I will be happy to investigate his allegations about waiting times, and so on.

It is essential that we stop focusing on beds and rather start focusing on ensuring that patients have the right care at the right time in the right place. People must not stay in hospital unless they absolutely have to. What is more, on the one hand, I am being asked to make efficiencies, yet, on the other hand, when I start to make those efficiencies, the work is criticised. I assure the House that if patients need to be admitted to hospital, I will ensure that trusts have the right number of beds in the unit to allow that to happen. However, our focus should, rightly, be on helping people to manage and cope with their conditions without the need to go to hospital.

The decision to reduce beds was not, as some have suggested, an arbitrary cut. The decision was, in fact, carefully planned and managed to provide an improved service to the patient. Nobody wants to be in hospital a minute longer than is necessary, and some of the improvements will help to ensure shorter stays.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I repeat that people can be admitted on the morning of a procedure rather than the night before. People can be discharged

more quickly, thereby ensuring a shorter stay. Some people may be able to have tests and procedures done as an outpatient rather than have to stay in hospital for them.

I have been specifically asked to take measures to reinstate a number of neurology beds. With the steps to improve current services, there should be no need to reinstate beds at this time. However, if there is pressure on beds and more are needed, I will ensure that additional capacity is provided. I believe that the service is well placed to meet the pressures that it faces in providing its vital role for the whole of the Province.

I accept that some medical staff and clinicians were unhappy with the decision. The trust assures me that it is continuing to consult staff on the matter and will take on board their concerns. There has also been speculation about the effect of the changes in the specialist input unit for stroke services.

Mr Gallagher wanted to intervene.

Mr Gallagher: I have almost forgotten why. The Minister has moved on a bit from the point on which I wished to intervene. He said that, essentially, the Belfast Trust improved the service and that it is now a better service. However, can he explain why, at the Committee, senior clinicians from the trust disagreed with those who tried to tell us that it is a better service? The senior clinicians are the people who work on the ground.

We need to get the full picture of the work that the Belfast Trust did to arrive at this point. There is great doubt over the agreement, given the differences of opinion between the administrative side and senior consultants.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I know that Jim Morrow had something to say in Committee and that he expressed his concerns. Discussions have been ongoing in the unit.

The Member wants to know how the decision was arrived at. I have just explained it to him. I said that it was arrived at by running through things such as benchmarking against comparable units in the rest of the UK to determine what services could be provided on an outpatient basis so that there could be shorter stays and fewer inpatient procedures. However, the Member talked about a concern

that he has and his understanding of the issue, and I am keen to hear from him. If he writes to me, I will investigate the matter for him.

I assure the House that the reduction in beds should have no impact on stroke care. Indeed, four hyper-acute stroke beds are being opened in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

We need to remember that stroke services are, and will continue to be, provided in stroke units at 12 hospitals across Northern Ireland. Jim Morrow's concern related to stroke services in Belfast at weekends, but the City, the Ulster and the Mater hospitals each have a stroke unit. I believe that Dr Morrow was on duty in the Royal that weekend. He is a serious clinician, and he has concerns. I have asked the Belfast Trust to ensure that those concerns are addressed.

4.15 pm

It is important to note that the majority of people who suffer a stroke are likely to be cared for by a care-of-the-elderly physician. A small proportion may benefit from thrombolytic or clot-busting therapy and receive specialist input from a neurologist. The current hyper-acute service is offered across the Belfast Trust on an age-related basis to patients who meet the relevant criteria. I want to be clear that the trust has confirmed that there has been, and there will be, no change in that service.

I remind Members that, in recent times, I pushed through other significant developments that will assist people with neurological conditions. One example is the acquired brain injury action plan, which was published in July and outlines a care pathway for people with mild brain injury and those with moderate-to-severe brain injury.

As Members are aware, I announced an investment of £50,000 in a neurological practitioners' network earlier this year. Alex Easton referred to that as a "token gesture". Mr Easton should reflect on that every time he gets up to vote for cuts to the Health Service, which he has done on a number of occasions. I invested £50,000 to develop, encompass and co-ordinate different elements of neurology such as education, support and therapy. Those are all essential to ensuring the best possible outcomes. The aim is that a network will involve healthcare professionals from all neurological services working together to improve communication, support and access.

The network will be well placed to explore the different models of service delivery.

I have also commissioned the Health and Social Care Board to carry out a full evaluation of the effectiveness of the implementation of the 30 recommendations of the 2002 'Review of Adult Neurology Services in Northern Ireland'. In parallel with that evaluation, departmental officials are reviewing the continued appropriateness of the recommendations in light of guidance from the rest of the UK.

I understand Members' concerns in this area. I took a hard look at the question of when is a cut a cut and when is it an efficiency or a modernisation. We are looking at a service that is modernising. We have made great strides in the treatment of strokes, for example, and this is part and parcel of that. As I said to the House, if it appears that we have a shortage of beds, I will make sure that the unit has the bed capacity.

Mr Brady said that we do not need the stress of cutbacks. I do not understand why he keeps voting for them. He votes for cutbacks to the Health Service. He votes for £700 million of efficiencies to be taken out of the Health Service. Where does he believe the efficiencies will come from when he talks about not needing the stress of cutbacks?

Mr Craig spoke about the cost of management in Northern Ireland. The cost of management in Northern Ireland is extremely low. From memory, I think that it is around 3.5% of the budget. For the benefit of Mr Craig, I remind him that I am the only Minister to introduce the review of public administration. We reduced the number of trusts from 19 to six, which means that the number of chief executives and boards have also reduced from 19 to six. I reduced the number of health boards from four to one. I took step after step to reduce numbers, and I believe that we made huge progress.

The progress that I would like to be made now is for people such as Mr Craig, Mr Easton and Mr Brady to be prepared to stand up for the health and social care service and to vote for the funds that are required to keep it going. Believe me: it fills me with dread when I think about where we will be in three or four years' time as a result of cheese-paring and proposals to slash the Health Service budget once again.

I remind Members that they voted through a Budget here six months ago that took well over £100 million out of the Health Service. That was in addition to other cuts, and it was done in-year. Where do you think that money comes from? The pain goes into the Health Service, to patients, and to the delivery of services. There are no easy answers to this issue, other than to be prepared to stand up for your Health Service.

Mr Wells: In these debates, it is normal for the Member doing the summation to go through the various arguments made by honourable Members on the issue. That is what I had intended to do until I opened my post this morning and read a copy of a letter dated 29 September 2010, which was addressed to Dr Tony Stephens, who is the medical director of the Belfast Trust. The letter is signed by nine neurological consultants based in Belfast, including the leading neurological consultants in Northern Ireland.

The only people who seem to be in favour of the decisions are the Belfast Trust, ably assisted by the Minister. Patients are totally opposed to it, as are groups that represent people with conditions such as epilepsy, motor neurone disease and multiple sclerosis. However, most significantly, those who are at the coalface and who are leading consultants with several hundred years combined experience of this particular issue are totally opposed to it.

We got a glimpse of that at the Committee's public hearing on the issue. It was a unique experience to see leading officials from the Belfast Trust being contradicted by someone who knows exactly what he is talking about. I wish to put on the record a few of the comments made in the letter, which, I think, are explosive. The consultants said:

"Despite our opposition and advice that this will lead to delayed diagnoses and treatment, translating into worse patient outcomes, the Belfast Trust decided to downgrade the number of available beds within the unit from 23 to 15, a cut of 35 . Regrettably, the Trust only decided to enter into consultation with us after already deciding to cut these beds."

Therefore, we have a situation in which the four health trusts that feed into the Belfast Trust, because it is a regional service, were not consulted. The charity groups that represent sufferers of neurological conditions were not consulted, the patients were not consulted, but,

fundamentally, the consultants in the Belfast ward who were expected to implement the decision were not consulted. The letter goes on to say:

"The Trust has indicated that the bed closures are to bring us into line with other parts of the United Kingdom. It seems to believe that reducing the number of beds will reduce the average length of stay, while maintaining the same number of patients being treated. No means of achieving this has been suggested. It is already the case that patients awaiting urgent transfer from other hospitals can wait for days to weeks, and patients waiting urgent admission for diagnosis, treatment and assessment can wait for 3 months or more."

That was the situation before that decision was taken. What will happen with a 35% reduction in the number of available beds?

The letter becomes more difficult for the Department and the trust to explain. It goes on to say:

"The 35 % reduction in neurology beds actually underestimates the problem. In 2009-2010, the most recent complete year, patients actually occupied an average of 24.8 beds within the Regional Centre. We therefore already overspill our stated number of beds, representing actual bed occupancy of 107.8 % ... yet an overstretched service is now earmarked for a 40 % cut in resources."

That is difficult to explain. The letter adds:

"It is estimated that to provide 24hr acute care for neurology in the UK, 15 beds/100,000 of the population are required. The proposed change would take us to <1/100,000 of the population."

I have worked out that that is close to being correct, with 1.7 million people and 15 beds. It works out at over one bed per 100,000 people in Northern Ireland. The letter adds:

"This is particularly serious since 18-20 % of medical inpatients have neurological problems, there is declining confidence among non-neurologists about dealing with neurological disease and symptoms, and there are seven hospitals in Northern Ireland with A&E departments that do not have a resident neurology service – Causeway; Daisy Hill, Erne; Lagan Valley; Downe; Belfast City and the Mater. Even in hospitals outside Belfast that have a neurology service on-site, there is no out-of-hours provision. The unit at the RVH provides the only 24hr on-call service for Neurology in Northern Ireland accessed by GPs, hospital physicians and A&E units."

The consultants go on to outline the consequences of that decision. Again, I emphasise that they are the experts. I have a degree in town planning, and I must say that I was a complete novice on this issue before I became the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I respect the views of people who know best; those who are at the coalface and who deal with those patients. Let us hear what they say; not the Department, the Minister or the Belfast Trust. What do they say will happen?

They say:

"Fewer patients with neurological disorders will be managed within the Regional Centre. Patients will have to be transferred to centres in GB or the Republic of Ireland for acute neurological care."

How does that square with trying to use resources efficiently? How does it lead to improved service when thousands of pounds are to be spent on transferring patients and their carers to GB and the Irish Republic in order to maintain the current level of service?

The consultants also state:

"Diagnosis and appropriate treatment will be delayed. More patients with neurological disorders will have suboptimal care. Patients with acute neurological disorders and are admitted to hospitals outside Belfast will find it almost impossible to be transferred to the Regional Centres — currently about 80 of patients in the unit reside outside the Belfast Trust area."

I must return to the issue that the Minister has neatly sidestepped. He keeps saying that responsibility for the service lies with the Belfast Trust, which is technically correct. However, it delivers that service to all of the people of Northern Ireland, including on behalf of the other four trusts. As it happens, for various reasons, during the past two weeks, I met three chief executives of those other trusts. There had been no discussion with them, nor had there been any with consultants. They were not consulted. No matter whether it is neurology or any other service, if the Belfast Trust provides a regional service for all of Northern Ireland, there must, at least, be a six-month consultation period to seek views from other trusts. I can tell the House that some neurologists outside the Belfast Trust do not agree with the Minister that it is an entirely new and more efficient service.

The consultants go on to state:

"Patients with neurological disorders will be even less likely to have nursing care from those experienced in managing such conditions. Patients will be even less likely to be managed by therapists — physios, OTs, speech and language therapists etc — who have neurological experience."

The letter goes on and on. The final paragraph of the letter, which will be in the public domain after the debate, is particularly telling. Remember that it was written on 19 September. It states:

"If the change proposed to the Regional Neurology service goes ahead as planned on October 1st, it will cause irreparable damage to acute and diagnostic neurology services in Northern Ireland. Those patients who still manage to access the Centre will also be housed in accommodation that is unsatisfactory in almost every respect, falling well short of what anyone would reasonably expect in the 21st century for patients with neurological disease. The plan is ill-judged, ignores clinical opinion and patient need, and appears driven by expediency. We would urge you to review and reverse this decision."

The letter is signed by nine consultants who operate that unit.

Need I say more about how ridiculous that decision is? I accept that there are times when we receive information on efficiencies and cuts in the Assembly and, when we listen carefully to the Department, we eventually see its side of the story and accept that it has made a balanced decision. However, I can find absolutely no logic whatsoever in this decision.

I pay tribute to all those who spoke in the debate, particularly George Robinson, who has carried the torch on this issue for many people, not only in East Londonderry, but throughout Northern Ireland. He is to be congratulated for raising the issue. He emphasised the fact that 35,000 patients in Northern Ireland — indeed, there was some dispute about that figure, with some Members suggesting that there are even more — suffer from wide-ranging conditions that include epilepsy.

Mickey Brady raised an issue that perhaps should have been debated further: in addition to the reduction in the number of beds, the number of single-bed wards that are available for those who have neurological conditions has been cut. Those who represent people with epilepsy emphasise how difficult it can be for

someone who suffers from that condition if he or she has an epileptic fit in an open ward, how embarrassing it can be, and why it is so important to have single-bed wards available for them and for people who suffer from other complex conditions. Few have mentioned that as an issue of great concern.

Mickey Brady also mentioned the lack of consultation with other trusts. Samuel Gardiner, quite rightly, paid tribute to staff. No one is criticising the staff, who provide a first-rate service. That does not stop us from making critical comments about those who cut that service.

4.30 pm

Tommy Gallagher, who has done an excellent job on behalf of people west of the Bann on this issue, outlined the issues of delays and the lack of consultation. Chris Lyttle mentioned the £50,000 grant towards improving the service. There is not much sense in paying £50,000 and then implementing such a drastic cut.

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

Mr Wells: I ask the Minister to go back to the drawing board and totally review that decision.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the cut in specialist neurology beds at the Royal Victoria Hospital; acknowledges that the Belfast neurology unit is a facility for all of Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that the beds are reinstated so that patients with neurological conditions have equal access to specialist treatment.

Adjourned at 4.30 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 30 November 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Local Government and Planning Reform

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

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots):

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the reform of local government and the planning system.

The Executive's vision for the future shape of local democracy is of strong, dynamic, citizen-focused local government built on vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities. Central to that vision is the provision of high-quality efficient services that respond to the needs of people and continuously improve. On the eighteenth of this month, the Executive brought that vision another step closer: first, by agreeing that I should consult on proposals for the reorganisation of local government; and, secondly, by endorsing my plans for a fundamental overhaul of the planning system. Consequently, today I launch a consultation process on policy proposals that will modernise the framework within which district councils operate, and those proposals will, in due course, be translated into a draft Bill for the Assembly to consider. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I also intend to introduce the Planning Bill at the earliest opportunity. In transforming the planning system, I will strengthen local democracy by devolving planning powers to the 11 new councils and putting locally elected politicians at the heart of the local decision-making process. I also propose to bring forward other initiatives to build on the work agreed by the Executive and to give my programme real momentum.

I turn first to the reorganisation and modernisation of local government. Members

will recall that the Executive's decision on the future shape of local government provides the foundation to develop strong, effective local government that will deliver improved outcomes for everyone in Northern Ireland. Strong civil leadership, based on effective and inclusive local democracy, is key to achieving these improved outcomes. I am pleased to announce today the launch of a consultation setting out proposals that I believe will achieve the Executive's vision. The proposals provide for efficient, fair and transparent decision-making across local government. They will ensure that the highest standards of behaviour are maintained. They set out a framework for a new community planning process, and they propose a new regime to help improve how councils deliver their services to ratepayers.

Before I outline the key proposals, I record my thanks to the strategic leadership board and its three policy development panels for the support and guidance that they provided in helping to frame the proposals. Indeed, the work of the board and panel members, who included elected representatives from each of the main political parties, has proved to be invaluable.

The first of the five areas that the consultation proposals embrace is the introduction of new governance arrangements. I want to ensure that councils operate to high standards, that they pursue equality and fairness within a framework of checks and balances and that there is openness and transparency in how they conduct their business.

The second area is the introduction of a new ethical standards regime for local government. That would include a mandatory code of conduct for councillors, with supporting mechanisms for the investigation and adjudication of appeals.

The third area is the development of a new council-led community planning process. I

believe that an effective, statute-based community planning process, led and facilitated by new councils, is critical to delivering the Executive's vision for local government. The process will enable councils to work in partnership with the full range of other sectors to link the delivery of effective, joined-up services in their area to meet the aspirations of local communities. The transfer of responsibility for the delivery of a range of new functions, allied to the community planning process, will enable councils to address the needs and aspirations of local communities. However, I appreciate that district councils can do only what legislation empowers them to do, and I recognise that there may be actions that they wish to take that are not specifically provided for in their legal responsibilities. To provide for that eventuality, it is proposed that district councils have a new power of well-being. That new power would enable councils to take any action that is not already the responsibility of another agency so that the well-being of their district can be promoted or improved.

The fourth key area that the consultation proposals embrace is the introduction of a new service delivery and performance improvement framework for local government. That would involve a revised, more expansive statutory duty for councils, requiring them to secure best value and to continually improve the services they deliver to the ratepayer.

Finally, I propose to establish a partnership panel for Northern Ireland to formalise the relationships between the Executive and district councils and to provide a forum to consider strategic issues collectively. I propose that the panel consists of Ministers, particularly those whose Departments have a significant policy relationship with local government, and representatives from each of the 11 new councils. Full details of these reform and modernisation proposals are set out in the consultation document that I am publishing today.

I believe that these proposals, allied to the reforms of the planning system, which I will shortly outline, are fundamental to our local democracy. They will strengthen local decision-making and give elected representatives, who understand the needs and aspirations of their community, the opportunity to shape the areas in which they are elected.

Planning reform is also vital to the success of local government reform, but it is in itself

designed to improve the way in which the planning system operates. Such reform has long been needed, but it is now a crucial element of the Executive's programme to support economic recovery. I intend to take forward the reforms of the planning system through a mixture of legislation and other means. On the legislative side, with your permission, Mr Speaker, I intend to introduce the Planning Bill at the earliest opportunity, and I look forward to the Second Stage debate.

The Planning Bill will provide for the transfer of development plan and development management powers from my Department to councils within a timetable to be agreed by the Executive. Councils will no longer be consultees; they will be the planning authorities, responsible for drawing up their own development plans and making the vast majority of planning decisions. The 11 new councils will be able to use the new local development plans to provide a clear and realistic vision of how places should change and what they will be like in future. The plan will support that vision by indicating clearly where development, including regeneration, should take place and what form it should take. In addition, the opportunity to develop appropriate linkages with the proposed community planning responsibilities should not be missed. Councils will also be responsible for determining planning applications. Councillors will be the decision-makers. They will have the recommendations of their professional planners, but they will make decisions and live with the consequences.

There is a sea change for councils and councillors, for those who work in the planning system and for developers, agents and the public who use the system. I will do everything in my power to prepare the way for that change. I will take practical steps to help councils, planners and the public to prepare.

I mentioned my intention to bring forward other initiatives to build on my legislative proposals for reform and modernisation. I have still not received clarity from the Executive on the local government reform delivery timetable, and I will continue to pursue that matter vigorously in the Executive. Nevertheless, a modernised local government, strengthened by the devolution of planning powers, is a worthwhile goal. Since I am determined to drive that work forward, I have decided to take practical steps to reinvigorate the local government and planning reform changes. None of them requires legislative change.

My Department has already brought together responsibility for all local government and planning functions, which means that we have a single coherent programme of policy, legislation and delivery of local government and planning reform with one team at the helm.

By 1 April 2011, I will have transformed the Planning Service to anticipate as closely as possible the proposed arrangements. The Planning Service's status as an agency will end on 31 March 2011. Agency status is a legacy of direct rule, involving the duplication of structures and functions; it is not needed under devolution. It is costly, and it gets in the way of decision-making. On 1 April 2011, the functions of the Planning Service and the people who deliver them will have been absorbed into the core of my Department. By the same date, planning functions will also have been reorganised to anticipate the transfer of development plans and development management to councils. That will mean a local planning operations division taking operational responsibility for the development plan and development management functions that will, in due course, transfer from my Department to councils.

A strategic planning operations division will take forward the responsibilities that will remain in the Department following local government reform. That will clarify the functions, people and other resources that are to transfer to local government — issues on which the local government sector has long called for clarity. We need a local office structure capable of providing an excellent service to the 26 councils and, in due course, to the 11 councils.

Rationalising the six existing divisional planning offices into five area planning offices designed around the 11 council clusters will provide for an affordable, effective and consistently robust service across Northern Ireland, and that is what I have decided to do. By 1 April 2011, we will reorganise to have a northern, a south Antrim, a western and a southern area planning office, each of which will cover two of the 11 council groups. The Belfast office will cover the remaining three. That is illustrated on the map that accompanies written copies of the statement.

The strategic planning operations division will take responsibility for the functions that my Department will retain on the transfer of development management responsibilities to

local government. It will also advise the local planning operations division on development plans, development management and design and landscape. It will also be responsible for processing applications for strategic projects and for developing the Northern Ireland marine plan, which will be prepared by May 2014.

10.45 am

To increase clarity, I will put in place a formal written scheme by which my successors and I will delegate decision-making authority to the Department and to identify the situations in which that authority may be withdrawn. I will publish the scheme for everyone to see. The scheme will serve as a model for council schemes of delegation when planning functions transfer and will build on the existing streamlined arrangements. I am also examining the financing of my Department's planning functions; to be sustainable we must live within our means. That means matching our resources to our workload. We are not charging the right fee for the job. Smaller, simpler applications, such as single houses or modest industrial units, are subsidising the largest and most complex proposals that are worth many millions of pounds to developers. Planning Service income does not cover its costs. This year, with the agreement of the Environment Committee, I increased fees in line with inflation, and I anticipate that, in future, fees will be kept in line with inflation.

I have completed the first phase of my fees review, and I am now consulting on proposals for making the fee structure fairer and more realistic. Applying my proposals to the current level of applications would bring in £3 million to £3.5 million extra income for the Planning Service. At the same time, we are working to resize and reshape so that we have the right staff in the right place to provide an excellent service. The changes that I announce today give us an opportunity to restructure senior management and strengthen front line delivery.

I want to broaden and deepen the debate about the future of planning and to hear what experts in planning and users of the planning system think. I will set up and chair a planning forum to involve key stakeholders in the planning field, the development industry and local and central government. I expect to convene that group in the new year. I will also re-emphasise and push forward the non-statutory elements of the

existing planning reform programme, including the delivery of streamlining, e-PIC (Electronic Planning Information for Citizens) and a new approach to the development and delivery of a suite of more succinct and focused planning policies.

I intend to develop and deliver a pilot programme to test the proposed consultative and practical working arrangements between the new local operations directorate and the 11 council groups. We will also use the pilot programme to test the proposed governance arrangements and the provisions for community planning. The pilot programme will be of particular interest to the Department for Social Development, whose urban regeneration responsibilities have been earmarked for transfer to local government. I have, therefore, written to the Minister for Social Development to ask whether his Department wishes to be involved in individual pilots. I intend to begin with a small number of pilots in April 2011, with a view to their being progressively rolled out across all 11 council groups by April 2012. I hope that, by engaging council and departmental staff, the pilots will enable us to test new arrangements to ensure that they are robust. I also hope that they will build capacity in the run-up to the creation of the 11 new councils.

Before I close, I record my appreciation of the work of Planning Service staff in making improvements over the past two years. Over that period, the Planning Service has introduced reforms to improve the planning system, including promoting the predictability of the planning system, the speeding up of planning decisions and improving customer experience. The introduction of two special project teams with a focus on processing applications of social or economic significance to Northern Ireland and employing pre-application discussions has resulted in some 90 strategic applications being processed. That has amounted to planning approvals representing investment well in excess of £2 billion, bringing with it associated construction jobs and post-development job creation. Since April 2009, a further 34 economically significant applications have also been processed, the majority within six months. They include Bombardier Shorts, Radox Laboratories and the Titanic Quarter to name but a few. Moreover, since devolution, Ministers have used planning policy as an effective way of responding to real issues that affect communities. Planning staff in my Department

have facilitated that process, producing a number of planning policy statements, including PPS 21, 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside'. I have deliberately adopted a new style for those PPSs, which are now shorter, sharper and more accessible to developers, the public and planners.

The development and implementation of the new streamlined consultation scheme, in partnership with local government colleagues, has been an outstanding success in speeding up the process of non-contentious applications. All 26 council areas have adopted the scheme, which has dramatically reduced the average time required to process and issue approvals, the impact being that 50% of applications are now processed and approved in, on average, 40 working days, or 8 weeks. Furthermore, work is continuing in order to raise the bar to 60% of applications by the end of the business year. Those short-term reforms have not only speeded up the progress of applications through the statutory planning process but improved the transparency and predictability of the planning system, which is of benefit to investors and the public at large. Furthermore, it is good to note that the majority of Planning Service customers rated their experience positively. Two years ago, only 32% of customers rated the overall service provided by the Planning Service as satisfactory. Today, some 63% of customers express satisfaction with the overall service provided. That significant turnaround in speed, predictability and customer experience stands testament to the dedication and professionalism of all those who work in the Planning Service, and their continued commitment and professionalism will be instrumental in taking forward the changes to come.

Mr Speaker, it will be evident to you and to Members that I am still committed to reforming local government. It is clear that the Executive as a whole are still committed to reforming local government, and I think that you will agree that the legislative and non-legislative measures that I have outlined are significant steps forward in achieving that goal. I look forward to working with Members and local government representatives to reinvigorate the local government and planning reform programmes, which will ultimately deliver a new model for local democracy and a vastly improved planning system. I shall end with a quotation from King Whitney Jnr:

"Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better."

Let us, together, demonstrate that we are confident and that we will make things better. That is what I have set out to demonstrate today, and that is what I will strive to deliver. I commend the proposals to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. That was a long statement that has huge implications for planning in the North. My question will be in three parts. First, the Minister indicated that he will take forward reform through a mixture of legislation and other means. Are his proposals based on the planning reform Bill, or does he need other legislation to implement them? Secondly, he knows that the Committee is interested in the redeployment of planning staff and the restructuring of the Planning Service. What further implications will his proposals have for planning staff, the location of staff and divisional offices? Thirdly, the Minister said that he would initiate pilot programmes. Where will they take place, and will he clarify what they will involve?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Chairperson for his succinct questioning. First, the planning reform Bill will be the key driver for all planning issues, and it will allow planning to be delivered by local government and for local government to be the decision-makers. However, the proposals are inextricably linked to the reorganisation Bill, without which it is unlikely, to say the least, that the Executive will allow planning to be passed to local government. The reorganisation Bill will deal with the code of conduct and ethical standards, giving us absolute confidence that we can transfer the process into a system that is robust and will stand up to tests. Therefore, both Bills must be enacted before the handover can take place.

The staffing arrangements at most offices will remain unchanged as a consequence of the process. There will be some changes in the southern area offices in Downpatrick and Craigavon. We will maintain the Craigavon site as the main office, while Downpatrick will be a sub-office. Some staff in the Downpatrick office may transfer to Craigavon, while others may transfer to Belfast because certain councils

will be affected under the new Belfast office proposals. The proposal to remove agency status from the Department and reorganise the offices will save £677,000. That is another significant step towards helping the Planning Service to live within its means.

The establishment of the pilot programmes will require consultation with local councils to identify which wants to be first to deliver a pilot programme. Undoubtedly, there will be competition among councils to be the first. That is good, because it will be a vigorous process that will be successful and will lead the way in delivering community planning in local council areas.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the proposals that he has put forward. I am tempted to ask the question that is on everyone's lips: who is King Whitney Jnr? However, I will restrict my question to the part of the Minister's statement that deals with local government reform. He mentioned new governance arrangements. When will those new governance arrangements for local councils come into effect?

The Minister of the Environment: On the question of King Whitney Jnr, what a philistine Peter Weir has demonstrated himself to be.

The timing of the establishment of the new arrangements will be subject to the consultation process. They will certainly be in place for the 11-council model. Should they be introduced into the 26-council model? I am quite satisfied to do that, and, were we to transfer planning powers to the 26 councils ahead of the establishment of the 11-council model, it would be absolutely essential. My preference is that the code of conduct, governance standards and so forth would be applied to the 26-council model on the enactment of the reorganisation Bill.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. I understand that the new Planning Bill contains hundreds of clauses and will bring about radical change to the planning system. Why has it taken three and a half years to get here? Given the significance of the changes, can the Minister assure me that there is sufficient time remaining for full consultation with the public and at the crucial Committee scrutiny stage, so that we get things right and avoid costly mistakes that would affect the community and, potentially, the economy?

The Minister of the Environment: There have already been two public consultations on the Planning Bill. When it goes to the Committee, it will be up to the Committee to decide whether that Bill will go out for a third consultation with the community. That will be a big ask of the Assembly. It is the largest Bill that will come before the Assembly, as it contains approximately 240 clauses. I accept that the timetable is tight. It will probably involve additional work for the members of the Environment Committee.

I appreciate the work that the Committee has done thus far. It has had a heavier legislative programme than any other Committee. It has nine pieces of legislation to complete by April 2010. I recognise the heavy workload that has been put on the Environment Committee, but there is a public expectation that the Assembly and the Executive should deliver. I have sought to introduce legislation at the behest of the House, such as the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill and the High Hedges Bill, and I have increased the workload, but that is what the public want. It is important that Members come together to deliver for the public and demonstrate that the Assembly is working for the benefit of the community and is not like the direct rule administration, in which civil servants called the shots. We, the elected representatives, are calling the shots on behalf of the public and are delivering for the public.

11.00 am

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Some of us have had rather different experiences of the implementation of equality practices at local government level. Will the Minister explain and give us an overview and some detail on what practices and mechanisms will be put in place through the new governance arrangements to ensure that equality is put at the heart of local government? What oversight mechanisms will operate at departmental level to ensure that that happens?

The Minister of the Environment: The local government (reorganisation) Bill has been a long time in waiting. I have always been keen to introduce that. It comes about as a result of the work of the strategic leadership board and the policy development panels, on which the five main parties have all worked to reach agreement. My colleague Mr Weir could,

perhaps, answer the question better than me, because he did a lot of work on the board.

Essentially, we are looking at a call-in system for situations in which 15% of council members are unhappy with a proposal. For controversial decisions, 80% support is required in councils. When councils cannot agree a formula for power sharing, the d'Hondt mechanism will be used. Therefore, equality and fairness are at the centre of the reorganisation Bill, which will seek to ensure that minorities, whether in the west or south of the Province where there are unionist minorities or, indeed, in the north or east of the Province where there are nationalist minorities, are protected and that the views of people in minority communities are heard and respected.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the Minister's statement. He said that he has set a challenging timetable for the Environment Committee. Some would argue that the delay in the legislation has set an impossible timetable. Thankfully, I am not on that Committee to contend with that.

Given the ongoing lack of clarity and the non-delivery of savings from the review of public administration (RPA) to date, will the Minister commit his full financial support to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association's (NILGA) improvement, collaboration and efficiency (ICE) programme and give his assessment of any potential savings that could be made from joint management teams for local councils?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member said that the timetable is "impossible". It is impossible only if we do not set ourselves targets that we aim to achieve. I do not believe for one instant that anything here is impossible. If people have the will to do it, it will be done. If that involves Committee meetings late into the evenings, that is what will happen. At ministerial level, we have many late evenings. If we want to deliver for the public, we will do it. If we want to lie back, we will fail. I do not believe that the Assembly is in the mood for lying back; I think that it is in the mood for delivering.

The Member asked about my commitment to supporting local government and about the financial arrangements. We have been working closely with NILGA on its ICE programme, and we are looking to use the collaboration process to improve efficiencies. NILGA has indicated that, over the four-year period, it can deliver around 7.5% efficiency savings in local government. That is not a challenging ask,

because we, in government, have had to deliver a 3% saving year on year. In fact, in the past year, my Department had to find 12% savings in one year through in-year savings. Therefore, a target of 7.5% over the four years will be a significant benefit. It will help us to deliver local government reform, and it will help to smooth the way for amalgamation by demonstrating savings up front and allowing those savings to be applied to the costs that are associated with the amalgamation process. We are able to do that in a much more structured way than by rushing ahead in 2011. We can make those achievements in a way that does not add additional bane and burdens on taxpayers or ratepayers.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Environment Committee, of which I am a member, has a heavy workload, but we will meet the time frame. How will the Minister ensure consistency of approach in applying the allocation method across councils?

The Minister of the Environment: I propose that, as in section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which sets out the application of the d'Hondt system for the allocation of ministerial portfolios, the legislation will set out the detailed process for that application and for the other available methods. A council could consider the Sainte-Laguë method and other means of power sharing, but, if it were not to agree to those means, d'Hondt would be the fallback method. It is up to councils. They are masters of their own destiny in that respect, and they can identify their means of ensuring that people will have their voices heard. However, if they cannot agree, d'Hondt will be used, and that might be the preferred option for many councils.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. During the previous consultation on reorganisation, the Minister indicated that he was keen to pursue savings through the introduction of a single waste management authority as well as delivery of back-office services for local authorities through one business services organisation. Will those proposals be included in the local government reform consultation?

The Minister of the Environment: Those proposals were not accepted by local government or by parties in the House. If people want them to be included, I am quite happy with

that. The reform of local government will be predicated on achieving efficiency, and I do not mind how that efficiency is achieved. If councils do not want to do it through a business services organisation and they can demonstrate that they can achieve the same efficiencies by other means, I am quite happy to go down that other route.

Ultimately, we want to achieve efficiencies. In a region the size of Northern Ireland, a single waste authority makes sense because it gives greater capacity in the procurement and selling of what are now highly valuable products from the waste stream. With the House's agreement, we could move forward quite quickly. However, if the House does not wish to go there, I cannot and will not do so, even though there are benefits and advantages to it.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for his statement. He will be aware that the Planning Reform Bill deals with development plans. My constituency is part of the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP), which has been delayed for years and has cost more than £8 million. Under the new proposals, will the council areas that make up the BMAP area be able to develop their own plans?

The Minister of the Environment: Yes, each new council cluster will be responsible for the development of its area plans; therefore although they will remain in a larger office, a development plan team can be put in to develop an area plan. Under the new proposals in the Planning Reform Bill, which we will probably debate in a number of weeks, we should be able to reduce the time for delivering a development plan from the current six and a half years to about three years.

That is a major boost for everyone, including business and the public, because people will be able to see what is likely to be developed in their area over the next number of years. Those processes will be able to be turned around quickly, less speculation will take place and there will be more clarity. Someone may choose not to buy a home if they realise that there could be intensive development close to it. Equally, someone might wish to buy a home beside which moderate development is to take place, and that could affect their decision.

All that is hugely to the benefit of the public in allowing development plan processes to take place, first by a local government team that will know the needs of its area; and, secondly, in changing the means of carrying out the

development plan process, putting public issues up front so that they can be dealt with early and allowing people a greater say in the development plan process.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for today's statement. There is an enormous amount in it that we welcome. I hesitate to say that the Environment Committee will relish the challenge posed. However, we will do our best. Given that there will be significant new powers and ethical standards for councillors, has the DUP finally agreed to end the conflict of interest caused by dual mandates?

The Minister of the Environment: I spoke recently to a senior council official in the west of the Province who thought that it was daft to do away with dual mandates, because he found that it is particularly effective to have Members who are lobbying on local government issues and who understand those issues. It would be a huge loss and a damaging blow if MLAs who happen to be serving on councils were removed from them, because the skills, abilities and knowledge that they have garnered would be lost. MLAs give up their time to serve on councils, and they work extremely hard to deliver for people locally.

I am not into this political correctness nonsense of going down a particular route to appease a few people. We should be concentrating on delivering good local government. The MLAs who serve on local government are doing a very good job.

My attendance record and work rate in local government were considerably better than those of many other members, some of whom were apparently full-time councillors and many of whom were either retired or working part-time. As an MLA, and even as a Minister, I was able to attend more meetings and get involved in more local government issues, because I was committed. It is important that people are committed to their job, and many MLAs are totally committed to serving on councils, because they want to serve the public.

Mrs D Kelly: I note with interest the Minister's comments during exchanges with other Members about the legislative time frame and the role of the Environment Committee. The Minister stated that he has not yet received clarity from the Executive, who appear to operate the legislative programme on a lastminute.com basis. However, will the Minister

assure the House that his Department has the capacity to meet the legislative timetable? Will he indicate what the budget is, given the shortfall of over £7 million in the Planning Service budget?

Mr Speaker: Let us deal with what is in the statement rather than straying from it to the Budget.

The Minister of the Environment: All that I can say to the Member is that her party is part of the Executive. Therefore, if there is gridlock or a problem, perhaps her party representatives should ensure that that is not the case.

Lord Morrow: I, too, welcome this morning's statement. As one who has served in local government for 35 years, I feel that the statement is timely. Will the Minister comment on the transition committees that were established? Some of them worked much better than others, because the people concerned were of a mind to ensure that they worked. Therefore, does the Minister plan to ensure that the people engaged in the pilot schemes, when they are established, take them seriously so that we can start to move forward? What will the consequences be if they do not do so, as has happened in the past?

The Minister of the Environment: As regards the pilot schemes, ultimately, this is about delivering better local government and preparing the way. This will happen; therefore, the people who dilly-dally, do not perform correctly, procrastinate, and delay for ever and a day are not helping their case. It is important that people contribute, apply considerable effort, and get real about doing the job in order to prepare their areas. That is so in many councils in Northern Ireland, and it has been the case in the preparations for councils' coming together. Many transition committees are still working on delivering efficiency programmes despite that fact that their members are not being paid. Therefore, let us give credit where credit is due.

Councils that have been less inclined to change will miss out, but those that move ahead will benefit in the long term. If people are real about delivering at local level, they will get involved; and they will be efficient and effective, because their work will deliver for local communities.

11.15 am

Mr Craig: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement and the proposed powers that will go to councils. Does the Minister plan to devolve some of those powers to councils prior to RPA occurring?

The Minister of the Environment: That will be for the Executive to decide. Once the draft local government (reorganisation) Bill is passed, and the code of conduct and ethical standards regime are in place, I think that they will be quite willing to transfer those powers.

If the political will exists, the Department of the Environment will create the means whereby the Planning Service can be transferred to local government. There is no reason, other than a political reason, why that could not or should not happen. We believe that the 26-council model can more easily get the community planning process up and running, because there is a stronger local base in the 26-council model than in an 11-council model. However, it is up to the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development to decide whether the responsibilities of their Departments should be transferred to local government before the 11-council model comes into place.

The Planning Service should be transferred before the 11-council model is established. It should go to the 26-council model on the basis that we have a code of conduct, an ethical standards regime, and that proper training will be put in place for councillors to prepare the way for the 11-council model thereafter.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement and I welcome most of the proposals that have been put forward. The statement alludes to the Department of the Environment having corresponded with the Department for Social Development on urban regeneration. Has there been any feedback from that Department on its willingness to engage in a similar process as the Department of the Environment? It would be welcome if we could work together and see proper joined-up government in the full functions that can be delivered through a reorganisation of local government.

The Minister of the Environment: Under its previous and current Ministers, the Department for Social Development has been a willing partner in the process. It supports the

11-council model and the transfer of powers, particularly those on urban regeneration, to local government. Should the draft local government (reorganisation) Bill become law, it will be a matter for that Department whether it supports the transfer of powers to local government prior to 2011.

The Department for Regional Development also has powers that could be transferred to local government, and I encourage it to consider transferring those powers in advance of the 11-council model. For example, car parking is hugely problematic for local communities. Some of the biggest issues that local shopkeepers have is about how car parking is handled and how people can be put off from coming to particular towns because of the effective rule that the "red coats" apply. It would be much better if such issues were dealt with by local government, which could be more sympathetic to local community needs and ensure that car parking is still carried out efficiently.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the statement, and, as a member of the Environment Committee, I look forward to considering the legislation. However, the statement is based largely on the 11-council model. Does the Minister not agree that it does not make economic sense to proceed with the 11-council model at the present time? The £150 million costs are front-loaded and will have to be found from departmental budgets, which are being slashed. If there are any proposed savings, they will only be achieved over 25 years.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member makes a valid point. That is one of the reasons why we did not proceed in 2011. We could have rushed in and had to pick up a large bill during an economic recession, when it was evident that public sector cuts were coming our way. Those cuts have now come, and we are not in a position to do this without causing real pain to other front line services. Therefore, we propose to identify where we can achieve efficiencies up front. We will start to deliver those efficiencies up front and, subsequently, reduce the pain involved with local government.

Local government will already have achieved savings and identified a mode of achieving even greater savings through the amalgamation process. There is a cost and a benefit to amalgamation. We want to create an element of those benefits up front before the cost is

applied. That will reduce the pain that results from the amalgamation process.

Ms Lo: It is a pity that there is such slow movement in the development of local councils. Nevertheless, I welcome the Minister's statement. The Alliance Party is very supportive of the community planning process. Can the Minister assure the House that his new model of community planning will take into account the Minister of Justice's new proposals on policing and community safety partnerships and the community relations duties under the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy?

The Minister of the Environment: I am committed to working with all the Ministers who have a role to play to ensure that we do this as well as possible. The power of well-being is very important. At this moment in time, there are areas that fall down because no Department or council has a statutory responsibility. There are issues of importance to the public that we fail to deal with. Through the community planning process, the power of well-being will enable local government to work in conjunction with Departments to deal with those issues and make communities better places.

The Department of Justice has a key role to play in working with the Department of the Environment and, indeed, local government to ensure that our communities are safer and better places that families, younger people and older people can all enjoy — a safe community which they are proud of and will work to make better. I am more than happy to work with the Department of Justice on these issues.

Dr Farry: I declare an interest as an outgoing member of North Down Borough Council. I, too, welcome the statement, but it is very much a soft landing for the RPA. It is disappointing that there are clearly still divisions in the Executive over the longer-term direction of local government in Northern Ireland.

I want to ask the Minister about governance and his reference to d'Hondt as the backstop of arrangements if local agreement cannot be found. How wedded is the Minister to that method, bearing in mind that it can produce strange anomalies in different parts of Northern Ireland? If it were introduced, it would effectively remove the prospect of any independent holding civic office in Northern Ireland. Based on current voting patterns, it would also remove the prospect of a nationalist ever holding civic office

in places such as Castlereagh and Lisburn or a unionist ever holding civic office in places such as Derry or Newry.

The Minister of the Environment: First, I do not agree that the statement is a soft landing for the reform of public administration. The content of the statement demonstrates that the reform of public administration has gone through a thought process and consideration of how it can achieve the desired outcome in a structured way that is based on solid foundations, can deliver for many decades to come, has not been rushed into and will not leave people with a host of complaints because we did not get it right. The proposals create the opportunity for us to get it right over the next number of years and ensure that we have local government that people will benefit from.

I am no more in love with the d'Hondt mechanism than anyone else. The d'Hondt arrangement does not have to be in place. Councils can agree other processes whereby even members of the Alliance Party could become chairs of committees, mayors or deputy mayors. I appreciate the Member's concerns, and he did declare an interest. However, we will create a system that ensures that minority voices are heard in councils and are not overruled. Councils are masters of their own destinies, and if they want to identify and go with a system other than d'Hondt, I am more than willing to allow them to do that. I will welcome those councils' decisions on what is best for their future.

Executive Committee Business

Student Loans (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call on the Minister for Employment and Learning to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Student Loans (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr Kennedy).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been selected, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Student Loans (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.

Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I beg to move

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 be affirmed.

The statutory rule has been made under powers contained in article 8 of the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, which provides that the 2010 Order must be laid for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

The 2010 Order will transfer certain functions of the Department of the Environment, under section 25 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The functions that are being transferred relate to the provision of guidance and strategies in support of the implementation by public authorities of the statutory duty to promote the achievement of sustainable development.

The transfer reconciles the legislative position in respect of sustainable development functions to the current administrative dispensation and is necessary at this time to support and underpin the delivery of the Executive's commitments in its sustainable development strategy, which was published earlier this year.

I commend the Order to the House and look forward to further positive progress on sustainable development.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Elliott): The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister considered the proposal for the statutory rule on 23 June 2010 and indicated that it was content with the policy merits of the proposal. The Committee further considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 17 November 2010 and resolved that it should be affirmed by the Assembly.

The Order seeks to transfer certain functions regarding the sustainable development policy from the Department of the Environment to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is required as OFMDFM has published a sustainable development strategy. Therefore, it is necessary to amend

the provision so that it refers instead to a strategy that has been published by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

The Committee resolved that the statutory rule should be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Would the junior Minister like to say anything to conclude?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): No, thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order 2010 be affirmed.

11.30 am

Committee Business

Freedom from Fear Campaign

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mrs D Kelly): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the high incidence of abuse, threats and physical violence against shopworkers, which is likely to increase in the run-up to Christmas; pledges its support for the Freedom from Fear campaign organised by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to pursue the issues raised by the campaign with his Executive colleagues.

Once again, I rise as the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning to move an extremely relevant and important motion that affects a great number of people in the constituencies of every Member. The Committee is becoming increasingly well known for bringing to the Chamber real issues that affect the lives of ordinary people. The Committee has a clear view that that is a key role for Committees: connecting people with the Assembly and bringing their issues to the attention of Members.

I thank the Minister for Employment and Learning for being present to hear and to respond to the debate. I know that the Minister shares the Committee's concerns about the intimidation and abuse that shopworkers face, and the Committee greatly appreciates his help in highlighting that issue to the other Executive Ministers.

The Committee decided to bring this issue to the Chamber after receiving a briefing from the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW). The Committee was horrified to hear from shopworkers some of the terrible abuse that they and their colleagues suffer at the hands of the public. Statistics show that a

shopworker is verbally abused, threatened with violence or physically attacked every minute of every working day. Members were greatly moved to hear of a young woman who worked in a shop and was beaten up by a violent customer. That young woman did not know that she was pregnant at the time, and she subsequently lost her baby. The Committee heard of other incidents in which shopworkers were abused verbally, spat on or beaten up because they were not able to serve customers, often because the customer was not old enough to buy alcohol and was refused service.

Just this weekend past, we heard about the kidnapping of a west Belfast shopworker, whose family was held captive while she was forced to take money from her employer's premises. That is not a one-off example. That sort of crime is becoming more prevalent, and shopworkers feel that they have nowhere to turn.

That is the sort of situation that many shopworkers deal with day in and day out. We have all found ourselves stressed out when shopping, especially in the run-up to Christmas, and have been short-tempered with a shop assistant who could not satisfy our demands. I am not suggesting that any Members would resort to violence in such a situation — at least, I hope not — but I think that we have all acted in a way that we are not proud of as shoppers.

Every year since 2002, USDAW has run its Freedom from Fear campaign in the run-up to Christmas to remind people that shopworkers have rights and deserve respect. Those workers are often seen as being beneath people's contempt, because they may work for the minimum wage, and they find it difficult to talk back because they might get into trouble with their employer. People set too much store on the saying, "The customer is always right."

Unfortunately, a culture of silence has grown up around this issue because many employers do not want to draw attention to staff complaints. All employers keep accident books in which staff accidents are logged. Why can employers not also keep books in which incidents of staff abuse can be logged? Too many employers are not taking the problem seriously, and their staff are expected just to get over it. Let me remind you of the young shopworker who lost her baby. Just get over it? I don't think so.

Quite naturally, shopworkers are looking to the Assembly and their elected representatives to

do something for them. One reason why the Committee tabled the motion is to highlight to Members and to the Executive the intimidation and abuse suffered by shopworkers. However, specific issues have to be dealt with.

A key issue that was highlighted to the Committee was proof of age in refusing a sale. Shopworkers are advised that if someone looks under 25, they should be asked to show ID when seeking to buy alcohol. This aspect of shopworkers' jobs provokes the greatest level of abuse. People working in local shops are often the worst affected, with their homes being targeted by people who they have refused to sell alcohol to as they are under age. Sometimes stones are thrown and windows in their homes are broken.

The purpose of the Freedom from Fear campaign, as well as to highlight issues around the abuse that I described, is to encourage employers to improve safety and security for workers in retail outlets, to encourage the public to stop to think about what they are doing, and to give shopworkers a platform from which to speak out and to reject that abuse.

Just yesterday, we debated a motion about driving under the influence of drink and drugs. We must stem the tide of violence in our society, which is fuelled by cheap alcohol. What does all-day drinking do to our society? The evidence is all around us. The Committee has been asked to advocate the introduction of a more robust proof-of-age scheme. Members are keen to see the courts setting an example and dealing more harshly with people who abuse shopworkers. Publicity is also required to ensure that people realise that it is a criminal offence for people who are under the age of 18 to attempt to buy alcohol.

The Committee strongly supports the promotion of Think 25 schemes. I ask Members to reflect on the fact that the retail sector is one of the few areas where jobs are still being advertised. Many people work at a second job in retail to make ends meet. The next shopworker to suffer abuse could be your daughter, your son, your brother, your mother, your sister or your father. The Committee would like people to stop to think about how they would react if one of their friends or loved ones was attacked just doing their job. Think how we all react when NHS workers or Fire and Rescue Service workers are

attacked. Why should shopworkers not receive our support in the same way?

If Members take no other message away from today's debate, they should simply remember that there are thousands of shopworkers in Northern Ireland, and they are looking to us to protect them. Are we going to let them down? What will you say to them on the doorsteps when you are canvassing? I thank the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers for bringing the issue to the Committee's attention through my party colleague Pat Ramsey. I also thank the Minister again for raising it with his Executive colleagues.

Mr Weir: I support this very worthy motion. As the Chairperson indicated, the issue was brought to the Committee by USDAW, which is the trade union that looks after shopworkers. It is to be commended not simply for its actions this year, but for its campaign over a number of years to highlight the issue.

It is particularly pertinent that the motion is brought before the House shortly before Christmas, because the tensions in shops during the Christmas rush can tend to exacerbate a pre-existing problem. It is important that the Assembly speaks with one voice today and sends out a clear message that no form of abuse, violence or threats against any shopworkers can be acceptable in any circumstances and must be utterly condemned. Therefore, there should be strong support for the motion.

The figures from the USDAW survey are shocking. The survey indicated that, in 2009, one in 10 shopworkers had been physically assaulted, and 29% of shopworkers had been verbally abused. Over the previous year, 32% of shopworkers, which is one in three, had been threatened. Whatever tensions there are, that is simply unacceptable. Therefore, we need to send out a clear message.

As was indicated, it is about showing respect to shopworkers. It is also about customers showing self-control. The proposer of the motion indicated that, at some stage, we have all done something in shops that we should not have done. However, I would like to think that I have not been abusive in any way. I certainly fall into the category of someone who has made the odd wrong purchase now and again, but it has to be said, in respect of people — [Interruption.]

I know that the Minister bought some dodgy goods back in 1998.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr Kennedy): That you helped to write.

Mr Weir: No, I did not — but, anyway.

There can be no excuse for such behaviour. Everyone should be able to exercise self-control. Also, the message must be sent to shop owners. Most shop owners are good but, in some cases, as has been indicated, there is underlying pressure to minimise staff complaints, perhaps to maintain a shop's reputation. Sometimes, that is by way of not recording incidents properly. It is important that support is given.

The issue of underage sales has been raised. It is important that the system is proper and robust. Too often, young people, in particular, who try to purchase alcohol or cigarettes, take the view that a shopworker is being officious. That worker is simply enforcing the law, and we need to have a robust system to ensure that that is done properly. I suspect that if the Chairperson and I went into a shop and had to prove that we were over 25, it would not be the most difficult thing in the world to do. However, in many cases, it is difficult to tell someone's age. A robust system is needed to ensure that workers can do that.

As has been said, we need to look at the current legal provision. Some time ago, greater sanctions were put in place to ensure that a range of public sector workers, particularly those in the emergency services, were protected. Indeed, sanctions were added. As USDAW made clear, we need to look at widening that to include all public-facing workers, so as to ensure that, irrespective of whether people work in the public sector or the private sector, if they interact with customers or members of the public, they get the protection that they deserve.

All of us, irrespective of our involvement with shops, are aware of the issue from personal experience. I suspect that either we or our staff have had to endure abuse from people who have come through the door of our constituency offices. Quite often, they have been under the influence of drink. The issue is widespread in society. The motion is timely, and I urge the House to support it unanimously.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In common with the two Members who have already spoken, I support this important motion. As a Committee member, I am delighted and proud to be associated with it, as was the previous Member.

During the past number of years, the Assembly has been no stranger to presentations from various groups, including the trade union movement. They have brought the real-life issues that affect our constituents to our door. I take the opportunity to commend the presentation that the trade union gave to the Committee. During our conversation on real-life issues, I was moved enough to suggest that the Committee brought such a motion to the House. In fairness, it was supported unanimously by Committee members. I believe that we were all thinking the same thing at that time. It is now a matter of how the Assembly plays its part to take that step further.

I also take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to the debate. I look forward to his contribution and to see whether the Committee and the Department can deal with the issue collectively. I also thank the Research and Library Service for the information that it has provided.

As the Chairperson said earlier, the Committee was horrified to hear about the abuse that has taken place. Some of it could, in the scheme of things, be described as minor, and some as major. However, I do not believe that abuse should be described as one or the other: any form of abuse towards any shopworker is a major incident and should be treated as such.

Peter Weir highlighted statistics that we received on the incidence of violent attacks, threats and verbal abuse. There is a stark reminder that, every year, thousands of shopworkers — our people, families, neighbours and friends — are abused, physically and verbally, and intimidated while they try to earn a living and provide a public service, and try to keep the wolves from the door. The Assembly is saying with one voice that such abuse is wrong.

11.45 am

Under its 'Freedom from Fear' charter, the union produced a 10-point plan to a safer workplace. The plan is not rocket science, and that is not a criticism of the union. We want the Department to embrace those points and to develop a campaign similar to the positive and proactive

campaign on attacks on emergency and blue-light services. Although such attacks are still happening, it has become socially unacceptable to attack the Fire Service, the Ambulance Service and the PSNI. We need to make attacks on shopworkers socially unacceptable.

Each of us has a part to play. The Chairperson did not imply that any Member had been involved in direct confrontations with shopworkers, but I am sure that if each of us looked into his or her conscience, we would recollect incidents that we walked away from when we might have challenged offensive behaviour or have played our part in resolving a situation.

Shop owners, big businesses and others have a part to play. The Chairperson mentioned the recent tiger kidnapping. Similar issues arise in mine and in other constituencies. They are happening across the board. Are we making our shopworkers vulnerable? We will not look at other ways of protecting them when money is being lifted from shops, for instance. I ask that we send the 10-point plan to businesspeople and to the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) to try to get them to take forward those points.

Proof of age is a crucial issue. I checked it out the other night. In fact, I was raging that I was not asked for ID. I asked a shopkeeper, who was a young girl, whether she feels intimidated, and she said that she does. Common sense should be used. We all know that alcohol cannot be bought at all tills. Why are older people not put on the tills at which alcohol can be sold rather than younger people who feel intimidated and under pressure in those positions? Members will have seen mile-long queues for tills while other tills lie empty. We need to put pressure on businesspeople.

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

Ms S Ramsey: We all have our part to play, especially during the festive season. We cannot have a murder picture in our shops. I appeal to people to be patient.

Mr McClarty: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I warmly support the campaign that we are discussing. It has generated considerable interest in the media.

The campaign, which has been successfully spearheaded by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers since 2002, seeks to prevent violence, threats of violence and abuse against staff. That is a message that, I am sure, all Members will support this morning.

When one thinks about a local convenience store, for example, and the number of people who go through its doors daily, it soon becomes clear that few jobs entail as much customer interaction as that of shopworker. The employees in those shops are there to help customers and to provide a service, and the least that they should expect is to be treated with respect and decency. It is absolutely out of order for shop staff to have to face any sort of abuse, verbal or physical. Such verbal abuse has been directed at people who work in call centres as well.

Worryingly, in their presentation to the Committee, USDAW officials revealed that abuse in Northern Ireland tended to be more physical, whereas verbal abuse against shopworkers is more common in GB. Regardless of how stressed or frustrated customers may be, it never gives them the right to mistreat staff. If they break the trust between them, they deserve to face the full force of the law. I ask the PSNI to take such abuse more seriously than it may, perhaps, at present.

Staff are most at risk at night. I am sure that all Members know of a local store that is open through the night, through its operation of a 24-hour, open-door policy or through providing services through an opening in the side of its building.

Of course, when people are on their way home from a night out and call into one of those stores, it is all too easy for the drink to kick in and to give them a false sense of authority and, consequently, they abuse the — often young, part-time — workers behind the till. Customers can also become particularly agitated when asked for ID.

The aims of the USDAW Freedom from Fear campaign are important for shopworkers, shopkeepers and shop customers. Take, for example, one of the campaign's central aims. It promotes negotiations with employers to improve the security of their stores. Apart from preventing crime, extra security means extra protection for staff and customers.

I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment and Learning is going to respond

to the debate, as it was his Committee that moved the motion in the first place. However, abuse against staff is not only a Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) responsibility, if it is even in that Department at all. It is much broader than that. It is an issue for the Department of Justice (DJ) to make sure that there are enforceable penalties for these sorts of crimes. It is also an issue for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Therefore, I trust that all those Departments will consider the Freedom from Fear campaign.

I will bring my remarks to a close by noting that violence, threats and intimidation of any kind against shopworkers are absolutely unacceptable. I commend USDAW for its campaign, and hope that the entire House will be able to fully support the motion.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion and commend my colleagues on the Employment and Learning Committee for bringing the issue to the Assembly. As my colleagues have said, it is one of the more important motions that we have debated in the House in recent days. Law and order is a foundation for any democratic society and a prerequisite for economic development and investment.

At the recent briefing by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers to the Employment and Learning Committee, I, too, was concerned to learn about the extent of abuse faced by shopworkers. As a former shopworker, I am proud to advocate on behalf of the sector and to call on the Assembly to send out a clear message that such harassment will not be tolerated in our society.

Shopworkers are the bedrock of our local economy, providing access to a wide variety of goods and services on an almost 24/7 basis, with adherence to the ethos that the customer is always right. I am glad to put my party's recognition of the vital contribution that shopworkers play in our community on the record today, and to call on the Executive to jointly consider action to tackle shopworker abuse.

My colleagues have noted the USDAW survey which found that, of 1,000 shopworkers, 10% were victims of violent attack and 70% suffered verbal abuse. Those are simply unacceptable statistics. It is also unacceptable to receive reports of young pregnant women being attacked in their place of work, workers being kicked and spat on, and staff being kidnapped from

the sanctity of their own home simply because their employment is in the retail sector. In my constituency, unfortunately, staff in a particular newsagent's shop have been subjected to two attempted robberies in recent weeks. That type of abuse leaves staff in fear and can have a serious impact on their health.

Today, we give voice to those hardworking members of our community — young people starting out, mothers, fathers, older people, foreign nationals and people working second jobs to make ends meet. We recognise the service that they provide to our community and we support them in their calls for the basic right of safety in the workplace. We give the support of the Assembly to the Freedom from Fear campaign, which, since 2002, USDAW has taken forward in the run-up to Christmas — which, as has been stated, is one of the busiest and most challenging times of the year for our retail sector — to raise awareness of the issue with members of the public and to clearly state that shopworkers must be treated with dignity and respect.

As we have heard, of all the harassment that shopworkers face, it is for refusing the sale of alcohol that the greatest abuse is experienced. That ranges from verbal disrespect to physical violence and even to workers' homes being targeted for attack. There are not too many of us in the House who need be too concerned about not looking older than 25, but I have friends and acquaintances who, although aged over 18, have not, in the absence of proof of age, been served alcohol. That is, at worst, inconvenient, and we must note that shopworkers merely follow legal and employer obligation.

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

In district policing partnerships and community safety fora all over Northern Ireland, we call on shopworkers to be the front line in the effort to prevent alcohol-fuelled crime and antisocial behaviour. The Assembly and Executive must, therefore, back up that request with support and action. We must work with employers to deliver improved safety and security for shopworkers. We must also consider more robust proof-of-age schemes, harsher penalties for those who abuse staff and publicity to remind people that attempting to purchase alcohol when under the age of 18 is a criminal offence.

Perhaps most important, however, is the need to support an attitudinal change in how

shopworkers are viewed by the public. The vast majority of people in the community value and respect the service provided by shopworkers. Indeed, we are famous for our marketplace interaction with one another. The motion, however, in highlighting the seriousness of the harassment and abuse that many shopworkers face, supports the Freedom from Fear campaign.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Lyttle: The motion calls on the Executive to take action against that abuse. I trust that the Minister will convey the Assembly's united support for shopworkers —

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

Mr Lyttle: I ask the Minister to consider what measures can be taken on this important matter. I, too, support the motion.

Mr S Anderson: I was pleased when the Committee for Employment and Learning unanimously adopted the Freedom from Fear campaign. As a member of that Committee, I am happy to support it. I applaud the efforts of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers to highlight the issue. I was shocked to learn of the high level of threat to vulnerable shopworkers. Violence in the workplace is without excuse and can never be acceptable. That sort of abuse is far too common. My colleague Peter Weir gave us some facts on it this morning. The most recent survey shows that one in four USDAW members is physically assaulted in his or her place of work. It happens to civil servants who have regular contact with the general public, and it happens to doctors and nurses when they are confronted by violent patients in GP surgeries and in A&E departments.

The motion reminds us of other workers who deal with the public day in and day out. It is clear that shopworkers suffer worryingly high levels of assault. Shopworkers are employed in large department stores, supermarkets, service stations and small corner shops. As has been said, such jobs are often low paid, insecure and stressful. Employees often work long hours, especially in the run-up to Christmas. I feel genuinely sorry for them. As Christmas gets earlier and earlier, they have to endure that dreadful, canned Christmas music that blares out in the shops and towns, probably from the end of September. I would argue that that is an assault in itself. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Is there any truth in the rumour that the Member is auditioning for the part of Scrooge in this year's pantomime?

Mr S Anderson: Definitely not. I will leave that for the Member to attempt. My singing would clear the Chamber.

Often, Christmas shopping is a stressful experience. Stressed-out shopworkers deal with stressed-out shoppers, and that, in itself, is a recipe for confrontation and conflict. Although we as consumers wish to ensure that our rights are protected when we buy something, the fact is that the customer is not always right.

Very often, the abuse or even violence is about age-limited products, such as DVDs, computer games, flammable materials, alcohol, cigarettes or lottery tickets. Retail staff are obliged to check identification if there is any doubt about the buyer's age. Such checks are not about embarrassing the customer — retail workers will be disciplined if they fail to carry them out — yet people get angry when asked for evidence of age or some other form of ID. It has the potential to go from verbal abuse to violent assault. Some members of the public go beyond verbal abuse. They can be physically violent towards staff, and staff can face drunken shoppers, aggressive shoplifters, gangs of youths on drugs and so on.

12.00 noon

If the problem is bad enough in big stores, it can be even worse in service stations and corner shops. Such shops, which serve local communities, can be easy prey for violent thieves. In recent times, shopkeepers and their staff have been assaulted and killed in different parts of the United Kingdom. Just a few weeks ago, a man died in an attempted robbery in a newsagent's in Cavendish Street in west Belfast, and the shop assistant was sprayed in the face.

I trust that the Minister will take note of the debate and do all that he can to raise the profile of the issue and to pursue it with the Executive. As David McClarty said, other Ministers, such as the Minister of Justice, also have key roles to play. I appeal to the PSNI to ensure that there is a strong police presence in town centres to control antisocial behaviour, especially in the run-up to Christmas. Finally, I appeal to shop owners and managers, who have a duty of care to their employees. Their staff have a right to work in a safe and friendly environment and to

be free from fear of intimidation and violence. They must do all in their power to achieve that. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and I support the motion.

I might be coming at the issue from a slightly different perspective from other contributors in this respect: when union representatives came to brief the Committee, I was not as aware of the statistics and the scale and frequency of incidents as I perhaps should have been. The briefing from the union was a very good exercise in raising awareness, certainly for someone like me.

I was listening to the media this morning; I happened to catch it early. Mark Carruthers was interviewing, if I remember correctly, Michala Lafferty on the BBC. Michala illustrated a particular scenario. She was saying to the interviewer that, "If this happens, well then —". I think that she was about to say that the shopworker suffers as a result of the incident by losing their job, when Mr Carruthers intervened to say that the shop, the managers or whoever the employers are would suffer. It was certainly insightful. We are not aware that it is the shop assistant who will suffer and who could lose their job, and that example illustrated the point for me.

I do not see enough coming from employers in all of this, and my party colleague Sue Ramsey referred to that. Employers are not proactive enough. When the Committee was briefed, an example from 20 years ago was given. The Committee Chairperson referred to a graphic example of a shopworker who lost her baby as a result of violence and who was more or less told to get over it. Therefore, examples from 20 years ago may be cited, and we have very profitable multiples here now. I am not saying that some of the examples cited to the Committee from 20 years ago arose directly from situations in big profitable multiples. However, there is something wrong with the systems that are in place to protect workers. Examples were cited around the Chamber today. A worker goes to work and provides a service for the public. When people are queuing in a shop, they have no idea that a shop attendant may feel under threat. I am not saying that a worker would feel threatened by me; that would not

be the case. However, he or she may be under threat from people who are unhappy with their place in the queue or with being asked for ID.

Many agencies are involved in the issue, but it is important that the message goes out from this debate that employers have work to do. One recommendation in the Committee's documentation is that signs should be put up around shops reminding shoppers that shop owners do not suffer if workers are abused or threatened; only the shopworkers suffer. The Chairperson said earlier that a culture of silence had grown and that many employers do not want to draw attention to staff complaints. I repeat: that is unacceptable.

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

Mrs McGill: One union representative said that this all comes at great personal cost. I support the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion. The Freedom from Fear campaign has been running for a number of years across Britain and in Northern Ireland. USDAW is delighted at the approach taken by a united Assembly team in the Committee for Employment and Learning. As I understand it, it is the first time that that union has been represented in a more formal setting and received by the Committee for Employment and Learning. As all Members who have spoken said, the importance of the campaign, leading up to Christmas, is that it strives to ensure that workers on whom we depend in all constituencies have freedom from fear.

One of the biggest problems facing the trade union movement and membership is getting in place assurance, proper protocols and conducts that the employers' body will take note of. One in four retail staff across Northern Ireland has been a victim of some sort of abuse. It is a sad state of affairs for us all that society does not treat those workers with the diligence, respect and care that it is our duty to show.

Every year, thousands of retail workers are physically assaulted, and hundreds of thousands are subjected to daily verbal abuse and intimidation. Over half of the physical assaults are linked directly to attempted shoplifting, and it is important that employers make staff fully aware of what they should do regarding a suspected shoplifter. A policy should make it clear that staff should not approach

a suspected shoplifter or stop or prevent shoplifting. I do not think that such guidelines are in place to protect staff. In my constituency, we had a spate of armed robberies, and I knew some of the shop staff who witnessed them. They took place in small corner shops, perhaps with only one member of staff present. Other Members made that point. Staff involved in such incidents are left traumatised. The distress and anxiety caused will remain with them for a long time. Sue Ramsey raised the point that a young woman working alone in a shop is vulnerable. It is very difficult, particularly at night — we now have 24-hour shopping — to ensure safety. The point was made in Committee by the Chairperson, I think, that it must be ensured that all staff have an incident report book — not an accident book or an injury book — so that employers know exactly where the risks and hotspots are and can put staff in place appropriately and not leave them exposed to difficulties in certain circumstances.

Other Members have raised this point, and the Minister has taken the time to come along this morning, but this matter is not solely his responsibility. One of the main and fundamental concerns that we have in the Committee is police response times. Staff, who are vulnerable enough, are being left, perhaps with someone fuelled with alcohol or drugs in the shop. They need response times to be much more effective. The Health and Safety Executive also needs to work not just with shop owners but with shoppers in order to protect them. There must be an ongoing review of procedures in those shops.

Another point that I wished to raise is about age-restricted sales. One of the surveys carried out makes the dilemma facing shop staff clear: more than 75% of staff have experienced problems related to ID. In some cases, people refuse to give ID and become badly behaved and insulting to staff. A total of 65% of staff have been subjected to verbal abuse; nobody should be subjected to that. A certain decency should prevail, and shop staff should be treated with respect. Some 16% have experienced threats of violence. There should be zero tolerance towards violence. Some 2% of staff have been physically assaulted at work, and 60% of those staff are worried that they may be disciplined over actions they have taken as a result. Some 70% of those staff are worried that they may face prosecution.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr P Ramsey: This has been a good debate. I am delighted that the Minister will respond, but joined-up government needs to be in place to ensure that we are giving protection to staff.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I welcome the opportunity to respond to this important motion. I thank the Member who brought it before the House, the members of the Employment and Learning Committee and those who have made contributions to the debate. As has been acknowledged, the Department for Employment and Learning does not have an official remit with regard to abuse against shopworkers, although I am happy to respond to the issues that have been raised.

USDAW's Freedom from Fear campaign is important and considerable. Since it started in 2002, it has raised awareness of abuse of shopworkers in any form. It is a particularly influential campaign that has succeeded in getting major retailers to speak out and act against shopworker abuse, and it has successfully lobbied politicians in Parliament and the devolved legislatures to raise the problems with the relevant Departments. I therefore pay tribute to the union on its campaign and support the motion because I am very concerned about the high levels of abuse, threats and violence of all kinds against shopworkers.

I note the statistics used by Pat Ramsey in his press release after the union's presentation to the Employment and Learning Committee. It is entirely unacceptable that around 10% of workers represented by that union have been the victim of violence, that almost 37% have been threatened and that approximately 70% have been verbally abused. The British Retail Consortium's crime survey of 2008 states that the overall level of recorded incidents was calculated at 20 per 1,000 staff. Of course, behind the statistics, there are always the individual cases. I want to refer to the despicable attack on a shopworker on Sunday in my constituency in the area around Tandragee, where a young lady was attacked and threatened. Such attacks are disgraceful and despicable. Anyone who has any information should bring it immediately to the PSNI to help ensure that those responsible are apprehended.

12.15 pm

A 2003 survey of Northern Ireland shopworkers revealed the following very disturbing experiences:

"One member was punched in the face for not taking back an item that could not be proved was bought in the store as per company policy. Two other colleagues were pushed and shoved for the same reasons."

In another example, the person involved said:

"The off licence was closed. Two drunk men wanted alcohol. While I was trying to explain, one of the men pulled out a hammer and kept threatening me with it ... he told me he was going to kill me with it."

A third example occurred when:

"Angry, aggressive customers tackled a colleague after being over charged. There was shouting and name-calling and abuse. Angry customers will vent their anger at the nearest available colleague."

When all those cases are heard in such detail, they are, frankly, unacceptable.

The abuse can take many forms, and shopworkers fear that it can and will happen. If it does happen, it can, as we heard in the debate, cause considerable health and emotional problems. According to the USDAW 'Voices from the Frontline' survey, almost 65% of Northern Ireland's members, compared with less than 50% in the rest of the United Kingdom, have taken sick leave because of cases of abuse. Clearly, there is a problem to be tackled. No one should have to face abuse at work. It is important, therefore, that Members consider the policy responses to this issue carefully.

Given the union's presentation to the Committee for Employment and Learning, it is clear that consideration needs to be given to the criminal justice implications. We have to ask whether the sentences for the abuse of shopworkers are sufficient and whether there is an appropriate response from the relevant statutory agencies. Those issues are worthy of consideration. There is also clearly a role for the PSNI to take attacks of this nature seriously, and it may be an issue to raise with the PSNI to see what guidelines it has in place for dealing with those crimes. In that context, I pay tribute to members of the PSNI. If Members are serious about ending the abuse of shopworkers, they will give continuing

and unstinting support to the PSNI and encourage full community support for the police.

Employers also have a major role to play. They are responsible for the health and safety of their workers while they are on their premises. The vast majority of retailers comply with their statutory duty of care, but it may be that retailers can take other measures to enhance the safety of their staff. Indeed, those issues were raised in the debate. There is much to consider. I understand that many major retailers have endorsed the Freedom from Fear campaign and have created a charter of respect for shopworkers. Some of the major supermarkets display signs that ask customers to respect staff. Perhaps that could be introduced in all shops. Therefore, there are some non-statutory ways of raising awareness and helping to prevent abuse.

Shopworkers, at all times, play an important part in our daily lives. They help to meet our basic needs by ensuring that food and clothing are readily available. In the next few weeks, they will be even busier as they deal with Christmas shoppers and, indeed, listen to piped Christmas music. Nevertheless, the vast majority of customers are considerate and respectful to shopworkers, and I strongly urge everyone to adopt that attitude. I reiterate that any form of abuse of shopworkers is unacceptable. Suffering abuse should never be part of that job.

I turn to Members' contributions. Mrs Kelly made the opening statement on behalf on the Committee, for which I thank her, and, indeed, I thank the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing forward this important matter. Mr Weir, having confessed to the House that he had bought dodgy goods in the past, sought to allege that I and, as I remember, more than 70% of the people of Northern Ireland had also bought something dodgy, namely the Belfast Agreement. It occurred to me that Mr Weir can, in part, claim credit for having had a role in drafting and shaping the Belfast Agreement, given that, at the time, he was one of the team known optimistically as the baby barristers, who were under the guidance of the then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. It would appear that Mr Weir has enthusiastically embraced the Belfast Agreement and, perhaps, helped to sell other dodgy agreements, such as the St Andrews Agreement and the Hillsborough agreement. However, we will leave it at that.

I thank Sue Ramsey, who realises that the issue is not the sole responsibility of my Department. Although other Departments have a role to play, I assure her that I will bring these issues to the attention of Executive colleagues in the hope that we can make progress. Mr McClarty highlighted the importance of the PSNI's direct involvement. Chris Lyttle rightly said that dignity and respect should be afforded to all shopworkers. Sydney Anderson is clearly looking forward to Christmas, particularly to piped music in retail shops. However, for all that, he made the important point that all shops, large and small, are affected by the issues that we heard about, and, therefore, all staff should be protected. Claire McGill also sought more protection for workers, as did Pat Ramsey.

Although my Department has no official remit for the issues raised in the motion, given that it was moved by the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I am happy to respond. I support the motion, and I am happy to continue to provide support to this important cause. I will, therefore, arrange for copies of the transcript of the debate to be sent to the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. In addition, I will, of course, be happy to try to assist the campaign in any way that I can in conjunction with Assembly and Executive colleagues.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Bell): Today, a clear message goes out from across the House. I know that we have had fun by referring to other debates. However, the core message is that we will not allow shop and retail staff to be treated as second-class citizens and that any form of physical abuse, threatening behaviour or verbal abuse directed against them, whether in a call centre or face to face, is unacceptable and will be treated properly. In addition, we will insist that cases are dealt with by the appropriate forces of law.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning outlined the need for a respect agenda, and she comprehensively and intelligently put the case for why we should protect and support retail staff. In her own fragrant style, Mrs Kelly also highlighted the need to produce proof of identity when buying alcohol to be more properly considered in the debate. How apt that message is, coming up to Christmas. Mr Weir told us that, at times, Christmas can exacerbate the pressures on

retail staff. I am convinced that everyone, with one voice, whether they are from the east, west, north or south or are republican, nationalist or unionist, will stand against those who feel that it is acceptable to physically abuse one in 10 of our shop staff.

Sue Ramsey commended USDAW's 10-point plan, and I underline the work to which she referred. This is not rocket science; it is something that we should be doing every day. However, it is not being done, and Sue Ramsey was right to highlight the need for the abuse of shopworkers to be deemed socially unacceptable.

David McClarty widened the debate to include call centre staff and said that abuse of those workers is unacceptable. He made a critical point about the need for joined-up government. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should be involved along with the Department of Justice and, potentially, the Department for Social Development because of the issues surrounding the sale and consumption of alcohol. We, as a society, have strong questions to ask ourselves when alcohol sold in supermarkets is cheaper than bottled water. Are we not building up problems for our Health Service and our families? People can buy mass-produced alcohol that is cheaper than water and drink it at home, where there are no checks and balances by responsible publicans. Is it any wonder that the police deal with a domestic violence incident every 21 minutes?

As a fellow shopworker, I sympathise with Chris Lyttle. I have many happy memories of stacking shelves in Tesco in Connswater. On one occasion when I was in the warehouse, the fork lift truck malfunctioned, and a pallet of Del Monte orange juice cartons fell on top of a poor colleague of mine who was standing next to me.

Mr Weir: Is the Member sure that it was not a case of mistaken identity and that he was not the intended target?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: As shopworkers, we could have a laugh together. I laughed so hard that day that the tears almost ran down my legs.

Shopworkers stuck together, and I remember that, if someone was sick, hurt or injured, we covered for them. We looked after one another. There is a retail family that deserves protection. Shopworkers provide a valuable service, and they need to know, as Sydney Anderson said,

that they will not be disciplined if they complain about being threatened or subjected to verbal abuse and will not be told that such abuse is part of the job. They need to know that a robust policy is in place to deal with such incidents.

Like Claire McGill, we have all heard about attacks. I share with her the Committee's shock at the frequency of such attacks. USDAW is to be congratulated on carrying out a survey of 1,000 staff, not in London but in Northern Ireland. That survey tells us that 30% of those surveyed have experienced verbal abuse and 10% have been physically assaulted for simply doing their job. I share with Claire the understanding that some staff fear that they may lose their job. Where would we be without those people? We need to highlight that, because they provide a service. We have all run short of milk late at night and have run to the garage. We have all gone to get loaves of bread for the children's lunches the next day. Where would we be without people who work late at night, often on their own?

12.30 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: What a parent.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: My wife tells me that it is difficult.

Pat Ramsey outlined strongly the need for robust guidelines, and I congratulate him on originally bringing the matter to the attention of the Committee. He also highlighted the fact that staff can be traumatised. It is not a victimless crime. A matter of weeks ago, I visited a filling station in Ballygowan, where an incident had occurred when female staff were closing up their tills. It looks as though they had been under observation for a considerable period, and, as they closed the last till, somebody came along, stuck a revolver into one girl's face and told her to clear her till. It took only a matter of minutes, but — Mr Ramsey was absolutely correct — the trauma that that girl suffered in Ballygowan will be with her for a lifetime. She will always remember having a gun shoved into her face.

One thing impressed me. I had heard about the incident on the news, and, when I was doing a constituency call in Ballygowan, I called into the shop and asked the staff whether they were involved in the incident. They said that they were. They were back at work the next morning. They had had a gun in the face the previous night, but they had to open up to provide

business the next day. We salute all our shop staff who have suffered physical violence and have been traumatised in the course of their work but get up the next day and provide us all with a service. The House will unanimously back the dedication and courage of those staff.

Mr Ramsey was also absolutely correct to record the need for those incidents not to be put down on the back of an envelope somewhere but to be properly categorised and reported in a proper incident form so that we can quantify and qualify the need for a response in those circumstances. The Committee for Employment and Learning asked me, as a member of the Policing Board, to raise with the police the need for them to treat robberies in shops as priority incidents with other calls, to respond fully and to adequately investigate such incidents at the earliest possible opportunity.

I thank the Minister for spending the entire debate listening to and, clearly, hearing what has been said. The most frequent complaint that I hear from constituents about Departments is that they say that an issue is not their responsibility or that they can only deal with one wee bit and the person has to take the rest of the matter elsewhere. This is one issue that allows a genuine attempt at joined-up government, and I appreciate that the Minister is taking it seriously and looking at what DEL and the other Departments can do.

In conclusion, I fully endorse the Minister's call for the police to be given full co-operation, which they get almost universally now. He pointed out that recorded incidents affect 20 out of every 1000 staff. The whole House will unite behind our shop staff, and some of us will go now to stand with the shop staff. I congratulate the Committee, the Chairperson and the House on their unanimous support for the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the high incidence of abuse, threats and physical violence against shopworkers, which is likely to increase in the run-up to Christmas; pledges its support for the Freedom from Fear campaign organised by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to pursue the issues raised by the campaign with his Executive colleagues.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The sitting will resume with Question Time at the new time of 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.34 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Speaker: I remind the House of the changes to Standing Orders. Ministers have a time limit, and I am conscious that Ministers had already prepared their briefs before the House decided to change the Standing Orders, so I will allow some latitude to Ministers. I will also allow some latitude to Members, provided that they do not abuse it. I am conscious that those changes will kick in from next week in a more serious way, but I hope that Members will be brief. Questions 7 and 8 have been withdrawn. One of the Members concerned has come to the Business Committee and given the reason why they will not be in the House, and the other Member has explained their reason to the Speaker's Office. That is the way that business should be done.

Flagpoles

1. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for flagpoles on ground owned by councils, the Housing Executive or the Department for Regional Development have been received and approved in the last two years. (AQO 631/11)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): My Department has not received any planning applications for flagpoles on council, Housing Executive or Department for Regional Development (DRD) land in the past two years.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the significant number of flagpoles that are erected around the place, particularly on many arterial routes, including some that are close to here, what does the Department intend to do to have a number of those flagpoles, and, indeed, the flags that are on them illegally, removed?

The Minister of the Environment: For the purposes of planning legislation, a flag falls within the definition of an advert. The display of certain adverts requires express consent from the Department. However, the national

flag can be displayed without the need to obtain consent, and, where such is displayed in accordance with the advertising regulations, the flagpole is deemed to have planning permission and no application is required.

Mr McDevitt: Has the Minister had any contact from the Minister for Regional Development about the work of the flags working group, which was meant to have been established last year on an interdepartmental basis to deal with the issue of illegal flag flying?

The Minister of the Environment: None that I am aware of.

Mr Speaker: Next on the list for a question is Mr Cathal Boylan.

Mr Boylan: Ceist uimhir a dó.

Mr Speaker: I am looking at the wrong Minister's questions. It is Mickey Brady next.

Heritage Sites: Safety

2. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of the Environment how much the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has spent over the last three years on safety measures at heritage sites under its control. (AQO 632/11)

Mr Brady: I am not sure how the Speaker could make that mistake. I will forgive you this time. I got my hair cut recently.

The Minister of the Environment: In the past three financial years, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has spent a total of £1,208,446 on safety measures at heritage sites under its control. In 2007-08, £345,204 was spent; in 2008-09, £443,644 was spent; and, in 2009-2010, £419,598 was spent. In the current financial year, 2010-11, the NIEA has spent a further £293,308 to date on safety measures.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he seek to ensure that the NIEA takes appropriate action to provide adequate safety measures concerning access to the adjacent quarry at the Navan Fort site in Armagh?

The Minister of the Environment: I ask the Member to write to me on that issue, and I will have the matter investigated. If there are any safety issues, we will address them.

Mr O'Loan: I note the importance of the health and safety issue. Have there been compensation claims, and, if so, how much has been paid out in recent times in compensation and legal costs?

The Minister of the Environment: In 2007-08, £19,375 was paid out; in 2008-09, nothing was paid out; and, in 2009-2010, £7,326 was paid out.

Local Government: Recycling

3. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what action his Department will take against councils that do not meet their recycling targets. (AQO 633/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The primary mechanism for ensuring performance in waste management is the Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme (NILAS). Although it focuses on reducing landfill with biodegradable waste, it also has the effect of encouraging higher recycling rates. Recycling targets apply to Northern Ireland as a whole but do not apply at council level. With the household recycling rate in 2008-09 standing at 34.4%, Northern Ireland is on track to meet the waste management strategy recycling target of 35% by 2010.

I am committed to assisting local councils in their efforts to boost recycling rates, and I am pleased to advise that my Department is implementing a range of interventions to meet the targets. That includes over £5 million capital funding for local councils in this financial year through the Rethink Waste capital fund; £1 million of annual funding for the waste and resources action programme; £240,000 for the Rethink Waste revenue fund; and the provision of guidance and advice to local councils on their responsibilities under NILAS.

Those initiatives, together with delivery of the strategic waste infrastructure programme, will clearly help councils and others to meet forthcoming EU recycling targets and EU obligations on landfill diversion. Although it is likely that all those measures will encourage further increases in recycling rates, I will continue to consider all options to ensure that those improvements continue.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer. He highlighted that, although Northern Ireland is on target to meet the 35% household recycling target, there is an obvious issue with councils' varying success in achieving that target. Will

the Minister indicate why there has been such a variation? Will he ensure that small councils such as Ballymoney Borough Council, which I represent and which is the second smallest council, and Moyle District Council, which is the smallest council, are given all the support that they need, given the current issue with the capital grant?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for his question. I believe that, regardless of whether councils meet that target, a lot of it comes down to the council leadership. Banbridge District Council and Antrim Borough Council are achieving rates of 48.3% and 47.9% respectively. Magherafelt District Council, which I visited last week, will have achieved a rate of 50% this year and is looking to achieve a rate of 80% within the next two years. Therefore, if the target can be met in small councils, there is no reason why other councils cannot meet it.

The councils that are not performing as well as others and that are well below the 35% target include Strabane District Council, with a rate of 25.7%; Belfast City Council, with a rate of 26.3%; and Fermanagh District Council, with a rate of 26.7%. Those councils need to reflect on where they are, on their contribution to recycling and on the impact that it will have on Northern Ireland as a whole if they do not step up to the mark and meet future targets. Other councils will carry them over the line for the 2013 model. However, if they continue to lag behind for the 2020 model, they could cost Northern Ireland a considerable amount of money.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister give his assessment of the number of councils across Northern Ireland that, first, have the capacity to provide services for recycling food waste, and secondly, are currently providing that service?

The Minister of the Environment: I know that a considerable number of councils are providing that service, but I am not sure whether they are all doing it at this moment in time. However, there is no particular reason why they cannot do it. A considerable number of facilities that recycle food waste are now in place. Such waste is one of the largest generators of methane, which is a particularly damaging gas. Therefore, if councils are not providing that service, I implore them to get on with it and to sign the necessary deals and partnerships with the private sector to ensure that the public sector does not lose out as a result of procrastination.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the incentives that are available to encourage councils to meet the recycling target. Will the Minister tell us what plans he has to monitor the various councils' targets so that we do not end up in the embarrassing position where ratepayers may be penalised for the failure of some councils to meet those targets?

The Minister of the Environment: As regards the potential for councils to face fines, under the NILAS regulations, an essential element of my Department's strategy is to meet the obligations of the EU landfill directive. If there were substantial slippage in that infrastructure programme, any fine accruing to the United Kingdom as a whole because of Northern Ireland's non-compliance would be deducted from the Northern Ireland block. That fine would then be passed on to the councils in the defaulting waste management groups. Obviously, if particular councils in a group are not performing as part of the waste management group system, all the councils in that group could be hit with a fine. It is, therefore, important that those waste management groups are the driving force in ensuring that those targets are met, otherwise a taxation burden, from which no benefits can be derived, will be placed on the public.

Planning: Replacement Dwellings

4. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the number of planning applications granted for replacement dwellings since the introduction of PPS 21.

(AQO 634/11)

The Minister of the Environment: Since the introduction of the finalised version of Planning Policy Statement 21 (PPS 21) on 1 June 2010, my Department has granted 97 applications for replacement dwellings in rural areas. Those figures are extracted from my Department's first quarterly statistical bulletin for development management, which only provides data up to 30 June. Due to the new statistical code of practice, it is not possible to provide information on any applications that have not been through the quality assurance process prior to publication of official statistics. The next development management quarterly statistics are due for publication on 9 December.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the Minister satisfied with the

controls that ensure that, when an application for a replacement dwelling is granted, the style of the building and the materials used reflect the vernacular style of the district in a sympathetic way, rather than allowing haciendas to appear all over the place?

The Minister of the Environment: There are two elements to that. First, there is eligibility for replacement. If a dwelling is eligible for replacement, it should happen. Secondly, there are design issues, and planning officers should ensure that the design of a dwelling does not run contrary to what should be in the countryside. We are in the process of developing a design guide, which will assist architects and the Planning Service when arriving at those decisions. In the interim, if there are issues that the Member or members of the public feel to be incongruous to development in the countryside, those concerns should be raised through the local government sector and the councils. That will ensure that those voices are heard, and that site or office meetings are called in those instances.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I am glad that you clarified the distinction between Mickey Brady and me; he looks a bit different with his long hair. Will the Minister give a commitment to the House that PPS 21 will be properly and consistently rolled out across all divisions? It is being interpreted differently in different parts of the North, and I want an assurance from the Minister today that it will be properly interpreted across the North.

The Minister of the Environment: On the back of the meeting that we had with the Environment Committee, the chief executive of the Planning Service will meet the divisional planning managers to discuss those issues. To be quite honest, there are far too many issues being raised with me on the interpretation of PPS 21 due to the lack of consistency across the offices. The chief executive of the Planning Service will meet the divisional planning managers to ensure that there is a greater consistency of approach to those applications.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He will be aware that, like the Member who asked the last question, I have raised the issue of inconsistency across divisions in the past. Will the Minister inform the House and the people of Northern Ireland

what he believes “substantially intact” means in respect of replacement dwellings?

The Minister of the Environment: “Substantial” means “a significant amount”. It should not be a collection of stones that once formed a dwelling but have been allowed to tumble down. We are looking for the exterior walls to be “substantially intact,” which may involve peaks of gable walls being lost or someone widening the access to the building to allow a vehicle to be parked in it. Those things would not necessarily affect the integrity of its replacement value. However, we do not want disused buildings dotted across the countryside; it would be better to have appropriately designed buildings to replace them. That is the context in which the Planning Service should address the issue: can we improve our countryside and offer people the opportunity to live in a rural community without causing further detriment to that community? That is where we wish to go as an elected body, that is where I wish the Planning Service to go, and that is the message that it will be getting from its chief executive.

2.15 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he advise what measures the Department and the Planning Service have taken to ensure consistent application of planning policy statement 21 across the North?

The Minister of the Environment: We have talked about consistency throughout. I recognise that it is a new policy and that not every planning officer may interpret it in exactly the same way. We proposed the meeting to ensure a more consistent interpretation of planning policy.

Coastal Planning

5. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment when he intends to address issues relating to coastal planning. (AQO 635/11)

The Minister of the Environment: Development plans extend to the low watermark taking in the coastal area. In addition, my Department is committed to having an integrated marine plan for Northern Ireland in place by 2014, which will also address issues relating to the coast.

Mr Speaker: I call David McClarty — sorry, Dominic Bradley.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Shíl mé go raibh tú ag gabháil tharam ansin ar feadh bomaite. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé. Does the Minister agree that PPS 16 missed the opportunity to address the issue, introduce proposals to create balanced communities and prevent the erosion of indigenous populations in coastal areas? How does he intend to deal with the issue?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 16 is a policy document that is out for consultation. If the Member thinks that opportunities have been missed, he can put his responses in, and they will be given due consideration.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware of the problem of unwanted apartment developments, particularly second-home developments, along the north coast. Will he outline the protection that the various pieces of legislation will provide on that issue, which is prevalent not only on the north coast but on other coastal areas around Northern Ireland?

The Minister of the Environment: Much of that is dealt with through the development plan process. The northern area plan, which covers an area for which the Member is a representative, will go to the Planning Appeals Commission for its consideration. The Planning Service will make its decisions thereafter. A consultation process of public inquiry will go through the Planning Appeals Commission, and the public will have their say. Influential members of the community, such as the Member of Parliament for East Londonderry, will be able to make the sort of case that he spoke of today.

Mr McClarty: I have an intense feeling of déjà vu, having been on my feet before. Will the Minister advise whether there are any live applications for offshore wind farms on the north coast?

The Minister of the Environment: There have been enquiries about offshore wind farms, although I am not sure whether there are any live applications. I take it that the Member refers to a proposal that was made some time ago for an offshore wind farm just across from Portstewart. All those things will be read against prevailing planning policy. Wind farms sometimes come into conflict with natural heritage; at the same time, we are trying to drive forward renewable energy in Northern Ireland.

The Executive have set us a target of 40% by 2020. There are tremendous opportunities to produce considerable amounts of renewable energy, not just offshore wind energy but tidal energy. It will all be viewed against prevailing policies.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will know that I am passionate about saving our coastline. The last two questions related to the north coast. Will the Minister advise the House whether he will also do his bit to preserve, as far as possible, the Irish Sea coast and, in particular, Strangford Lough, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty in every sense?

The Minister of the Environment: The planning policies that are established apply to all of Northern Ireland rather than any one particular area. The development plans get into the details of particular areas and seek to identify the needs of the people in those areas and to provide for those needs without causing fundamental damage to other key elements of our built-in natural heritage.

We have the new 'Ards Down Area Plan 2015', which was brought about over the past few years. That is the main document for assessing planning applications in conjunction with the planning policy statements in the area.

Mr Speaker: Raymond McCartney is not in his place for question 6. As I have already indicated, questions 7 and 8 have been withdrawn.

Goods Vehicle Licensing

9. **Mr Callaghan** asked the Minister of the Environment when the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 will be implemented. (AQO 639/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 22 January 2010. A programme plan was developed on the basis of a two-year implementation period. An implementation team has been in place since April 2010, and there is no delay in the programme. It is expected that the Act will be operational by early 2012.

Mr Callaghan: What assurances can the Minister give us that the processing of licence applications will remain in Northern Ireland and will not be centralised in Wales or elsewhere?

The Minister of the Environment: That is one of the challenging issues when it comes to financial arrangements. We probably have to identify a considerable new computer system. If that system is adopted, it will be at very significant cost. There may be opportunities to do that in conjunction with the private sector to keep the processing of licence applications in Northern Ireland. That could be done at a lower cost in Wales, because the system is already in place there. However, the consequence of doing that would be jobs lost to Northern Ireland.

None of those issues will be dealt with lightly, nor will they be dealt with without proper and adequate consultation. At this moment, there is no proposal to transfer any of those jobs out of Northern Ireland.

Planning Policy Statement 4

10. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the benefits that the revised PPS 4 will have for the business community. (AQO 640/11)

The Minister of the Environment: Revised PPS 4 will help to achieve a modern vibrant economy, provide certainty and give clarity to businesses, and that should result in faster and better planning decisions. PPS 4 provides up-to-date policy to meet the needs of a modern economy, including IT and research and development. It also includes regional policy for offices, storage and distribution and provides flexibility for economic development in rural areas.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he indicate what the policy's impact will be for rural areas?

The Minister of the Environment: Revised PPS 4 has a positive approach to development in the countryside and complements PPS 21 by introducing a degree of flexibility for businesses in rural areas. It contains policies on expansion and redevelopment of established economic development uses, major industrial development and small rural projects. Planning Service has approximately 200 applications that are related to commercial and industrial uses. The final publication of PPS 4 may have an impact and allow a number of those applications in rural constituencies to move towards approval.

Road Safety: Christmas

11. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of the Environment what additional measures his Department intends to implement over the Christmas and new year period to ensure maximum safety for road users. (AQO 641/11)

The Minister of the Environment: I apologise, Mr Speaker; this is a long answer. The launch of the PSNI Christmas anti-drink-driving operation took place on Friday 26 November 2010 and will be supported by the Department. The Christmas and new year anti-drink-driving television campaign, Hit Home, will commence on 1 December 2010 and will continue throughout the Christmas and new year period and will end early in January 2011. The campaign will consist of a 30-second TV advertisement; washroom posters; glowboxes displayed in pubs, clubs and restaurants throughout Northern Ireland; and online activity carrying the "Never Ever Drink and Drive" strapline.

Several special buys of the hard-hitting Shame campaign, originally launched in 2000, will air throughout December. The campaign will consist of a 60-second TV advertisement and will carry the strapline:

"Could You Live With The Shame?"

The Department's anti-drug-driving campaign, Steps, will be on air during the traditional Christmas party calendar from mid-November to the new year. That campaign seeks to raise awareness of the drug-driving problem and to highlight the ultimate consequences of driving under the influence of drugs and carries the strapline:

"What steps will you take to stop a drug driver from wrecking your life?"

This will be the third year of the 'Gift' radio campaign, consisting of a portfolio of five radio edits. The campaign will run throughout December, targeting all road users with a mix of key road safety messages that focus on the Christmas period. Department of the Environment (DOE) road safety interventions will appear on many Internet sites over the Christmas and new year period. Digital warnings from our extensive online portfolio will address many problem road-user behaviours using display and search engine marketing techniques where the audience least expects it.

This is the fourth year of the Coca-Cola designated driver initiative, launching on 30 November. Once again, the Department and the PSNI will be supporting the initiative. The scheme, which will be operational in many venues across Northern Ireland, offers three free soft drinks to designated drivers during the festive season.

My Department and the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland intend to issue a joint appeal on road safety, with particular focus on the border areas in the run-up to Christmas. Mutual support can be particularly effective in the North/South context because of similarities in the road safety record and the common cause of fatalities and serious injuries.

This year, the Ulster GAA and Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster will support the DOE and help to deliver the road safety message to the most vulnerable on our roads: young people in rural areas, particularly young males, around the Christmas and new year period.

During road safety week, 22 to 28 November, a series of events supporting the DOE as well as the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, Brake UK and others, raised awareness of how dangerous our roads are. That is timely, as many of us are preparing for the Christmas period, and we are taking the opportunity to urge caution on all road users at this busy time.

Mr Boylan: I was going to get Mickey Brady to ask the supplementary question for me. That was a very detailed answer but the Minister highlighted the issue along the border, and more co-operation between the PSNI and the Garda. Does he intend to put more resources into that area because, as he is aware, most of the fatalities and accidents occur in and around rural border roads?

The Minister of the Environment: I met the police and strongly encouraged them to pay more attention to the south and west of the Province, because that was where the most road deaths were taking place. Therefore, it is imperative for us to seek to ensure that people's lives are protected, because very often those who are killed on the roads are innocent parties, not the people who are breaking the law. We really need to ensure that people can travel safely on our roads.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister agree that the major area of loss of life and serious injury is on rural

roads? Will he join me in encouraging the police to target not necessarily only areas where they can easily catch speeders, but to set specific targets for the rural roads on which deaths and serious injuries are occurring?

The Minister of the Environment: Sophisticated targeting of areas where deaths and injuries are taking place is key to moving things forward. It is not always best policy to engage in areas where it is easy to catch someone speeding but where it does not have a particularly significant consequence, or where a road does not have a significant traffic accident history. That is a matter for the PSNI, but we should concentrate on areas with the highest number of road deaths.

Planning Applications

12. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to clear the current backlog of planning applications. (AQO 642/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The Member may be aware of the action plan that is in place to deal with the PPS 14/21 applications that were at deferral stage prior to the publication of the final version of PPS 21 on 1 June 2010.

A time frame of six months for the reassessment of those backlog applications was agreed, which expires on 1 December. As agreed, divisional planning offices are continuing to reassess those applications in accordance with the time frame outlined. Of the other backlog applications, I agreed with my officials that we shall initially concentrate on determining the major category of planning applications that have been in the system for more than 12 months. As a result, my Department agreed divisional action plans for the 2010-11 business year, with a view to reducing the backlog of major applications that exceed 12 months in the system.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response. How have staff reduction and relocation in the Planning Service impacted on the backlog?

The Minister of the Environment: Staff reduction and relocation were done out of necessity, not desire. That will not have had a positive impact on dealing with the backlog of planning applications. However, we are, or have been, dealing with more planning applications. Therefore, the backlog has been reduced.

2.30 pm

Lord Morrow: Is the Minister prepared to consider extending the time for businesses that have submitted a planning application but, because of the economic downturn, are unable to proceed with their development at this time?

The Minister of the Environment: That matter was part of the consultation on the planning Bill, and I am sure that the Committee will also consider it. People whose background is in the community or in residents' groups would prefer that time to be shortened, but people from a business background would prefer it to be lengthened. The identification of the best way to proceed is the conundrum that we will always face. Therefore, we do not propose to extend or to reduce the length of time. That can be done through the planning reform Bill, which I hope to bring to the Assembly in the near future.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that question 11 has been withdrawn.

Government: Revenue

1. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether any steps have been taken by his Department to identify ways to raise revenue through renting or selling properties within the Civil Service estate. (AQO 645/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I can speak only of the property that is owned and leased by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), namely the government office estate. That comprises approximately 200 buildings, with a total asset value of £300 million. Properties division has a three-year accommodation plan, which is focused on generating savings through either improving the utilisation of the space within the estate or generating capital receipts from the sale of surplus assets. So far, through reducing the amount of space that we lease, we have generated annual savings of £1.68 million over the past two years. Over the next three years, savings of £2.85 million are anticipated through the vacation of further buildings. In addition, when sites were declared surplus to requirements, our sale of buildings released

capital of £2.2 million, and we look forward to selling two further sites.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. If the Minister's figures related only to DFP, it would be a serious indicator of the overall amount of money involved in rent and rates for government buildings. Nevertheless, and perhaps even because of that, has the Minister requested or received any update on the costs that might be saved through the decentralisation of Departments or their associated offices and agencies?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cost of decentralisation was not an issue of savings. The cost of decentralisation was estimated at £40 million, which is one reason why it has not proceeded. The real savings are to be found in looking at the office space that is required and trying to use it more intensively, looking at where we overuse space, terminating or not renewing leases that are coming to an end, and bringing people together in fewer offices. That kind of approach will bring savings in the future. As I said, over the next three years, we intend to make savings of about £2.87 million on the Northern Ireland Civil Service office estate.

Mr McNarry: I heard the Minister say that the current value of the estate is £300 million. Does the estate have an income-generating potential for us?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Indeed it does. One way that we could release some money is through the sale and leaseback of part of our estate. That has added benefits. If we needed to improve buildings, they could be sold, improved and leased back. That would immediately release capital, because we would get the capital value of the buildings.

However, the longer-run impact of that would, of course, be the cost stream from paying rent over the years. At present, the problem, which we are looking at actively with regard to certain projects, is that, because of the state of the market and the rate of return that people would require, we would probably either get a lower price for the offices that we sell or have to pay a higher rent. There would be consequences for the future.

Mr O'Loan: My question is in a similar vein. Rather than asking the Minister what he might

or will do, I want to know what has been done since the collapse of Workplace 2010 to realise the two aims of that project: to raise revenue and to improve the quality of the estate as a workspace for staff.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As the Member knows, Workplace 2010 envisaged putting about 70% of the estate up for sale, leasing it back and releasing capital assets from that. Due to market conditions, that did not progress. We are working with the Strategic Investment Board and with the central assets realisation team to compile a list of all the properties and land under each Department's control in order to finalise the assets that we hold, determine their potential and realise sale or lease-back opportunities, or, indeed, sale of assets. I was surprised to find that no such list existed.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I refer to the Minister's last point. It is a bad time to sell part of the estate. However, the running costs of places such as Loughery College and Greenmount College and the upkeep of vast swathes of land must greatly affect revenue. The same could be said of any other property. It is a bad time to sell. Nevertheless, sale should be considered.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is easy for Members to stand up in the Assembly to say that although it is a bad time to sell, selling should be considered. Although it might seem a sensible approach to release money for some capital pet projects that people want to be dealt with, it might look different in three or four years' time, when the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Office ask why a valuable asset was given away.

I have said time and time again that it is important that Ministers and Departments be held to account for their decisions. However, sometimes, with the best will in the world, a decision is made that, with hindsight, might not look like a great decision. Of course, the louder the demand for scalps for decisions that were made for the best reasons in the past, the more cautious people become when making the kind of bold decisions that the Member suggested.

Comprehensive Spending Review 2010

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he expects to be

updated by HM Treasury on the impact of the comprehensive spending review on our economy. (AQO 646/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not expect Her Majesty's Treasury to undertake any analysis of the impact of the spending review on Northern Ireland. The spending review was announced on 20 October 2010. The amount of money that came to Northern Ireland was the amount that the Treasury believed that it was entitled to under the Barnett formula. It is now up to the Northern Ireland Executive to decide how they apportion that Budget among Departments. Hopefully, we will do so soon. I expect Her Majesty's Treasury to issue the paper on rebalancing the economy, which it has promised. I intend to continue to press it for delivery of that paper as soon as possible.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When will the Assembly see that paper? Members need all the relevant information before we can discuss the Budget and address it properly.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me disabuse Members of any idea that we can delay the Budget until we receive the Treasury paper. If that were the case, and since we anticipate that we will not have the paper until late December or early in the new year, we simply would not have a Budget for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the initial paper is likely to be a discussion paper. It is important for us to decide our Budget on the basis of the revenue and the money that we know is available to us.

Mr Givan: Should the Executive fail to reach agreement on the Budget, will the Minister elaborate on the impact of that on our economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I think that I have indicated the impact, time and time again. The current uncertainty is causing great distress among those who rely on budget allocations from the Executive. Only this morning, I heard someone from the Children's Hospice talking about the impact that the lack of knowledge about what is happening next year and the following years is having on the work of the hospice. Many voluntary and community groups are wondering whether they should put people on protective notice, because they do not know what their budget will be for next year. A number of Ministers have told me that they need certainty so that they can discuss what

spending will be available with trusts, boards and units in their Departments. Those are the practical difficulties.

There is also the political reality. If we do not get the Budget sorted out, people will take a view on the Assembly's effectiveness on the issue. I do not want to play up negative aspects. I hope that all members of the Executive and all parties of the Assembly will adopt a responsible attitude so that we can establish a Budget quickly.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What steps does the Minister think should be taken in the new Budget to deliver better on the priority to grow the regional economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am glad that the Member asked that question. That involves a number of issues, which is why discussion on, and quick establishment of, the Budget is so important. The Budget must not be a last-minute, knee-jerk reaction to a crisis that we have allowed to develop. It has to be strategic, and we must take a strategic view on it.

First, although our capital allocation has been greatly reduced, we must look at the infrastructure projects that most effectively make Northern Ireland a better place for businesses. Those projects might be on the road network, the telecommunications networks or the ports. They are the types of project that will help us to deliver goods and services not only in Northern Ireland but in the export market to the wider world.

Secondly, we must ensure that sufficient money is set aside to capitalise on the good work that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is doing in seeking opportunities for inward investment. On the basis of the information that she has given to me, the pipeline of enquiries has never been fuller. Over the past year, per head of population in Northern Ireland, we delivered as many jobs as were delivered in the Republic, even without the reduced rate of corporation tax. We must ensure that enough money is put into the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment budget to maintain that momentum.

Thirdly, given that our skilled workforce is one of our big selling points, the Department for Employment and Learning budget is important for maintaining training and the proper skills

base, anticipating the skills that will be needed and preparing people for those jobs.

Another factor has been mentioned, which is that we must try to get the Government at Westminster to deliver some additional levers to us that will help to attract inward investment.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister advised his ministerial colleagues, when they make their cuts, to consider the net impact of those cuts? For instance, will the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's cut to the North West 200 funding lead to an even greater loss of tourism revenue to the Northern Ireland economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

The savings plans of Departments are up to individual Ministers. One reason why I gave early warning of the likely Budget pressures in June was to give Ministers time to consider what savings plans they might put in place, how those savings might impact and how they might affect some important areas such as tourism and industrial promotion, which have to be addressed.

I am very disappointed that many Ministers have not even produced savings plans. Some have actually taken their savings plans to their Committees already, whereas others have not even produced them or I have not seen them, which is disappointing.

2.45 pm

I hope that all Ministers, when considering what savings to implement, will consider their impact. I have said to them time and time again that if they are going to reduce, they should reduce the level of bureaucracy in their Departments, make sure that they are delivering services in the most efficient way and cutting down on administration. They should look to see whether there are ways of carrying out the same delivery more effectively, perhaps by using the social sector. Ministers should always be aware that some savings will have greater impact than others, and the Member has given an example for the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister assure the House that he will advise all the other Ministers not to see the voluntary sector as an easy target for cutting the budget for front line services?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am glad that the Member asked that question, because I have had many meetings with the

voluntary and social sector. Rather than seeing it as a burden on the Executive's Budget, much of the sector's work should be seen as an opportunity for more effective and innovative delivery of services. I am sure there will always be the tendency for Ministers to keep things in their Departments; they are the things closest to Ministers, and of which those who advise Ministers have most knowledge. However, I hope that Ministers will look seriously at the services and opportunities in the voluntary sector, especially preventative areas. They should make sure that they make full use of the sector's expertise and efficiencies.

I have been impressed by the voluntary and social sector, which is well ahead of the game in making its services more cost-effective by looking at mergers and changes. In doing so, organisations in that sector place themselves well to make bids for parts of the Budget.

Government: Revenue

3. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any engagements his Department has had with independent economic advisers regarding new ways in which the Executive could raise revenue. (AQO 647/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My Department has not met any independent economic advisers to discuss how the Executive could raise new revenue. However, we have done two things. As part of the Budget review group, we have asked all Departments to come up with suggestions as to how revenue might be raised in their Departments. Somebody very courteously leaked that paper to one of the local newspapers, so there is a whole list of those things in the public domain already. I am not sure who did it, but someone felt that the public should have full sight of it. I have also met the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, and the Chamber of Commerce, among others, to discuss where they see the potential for raising revenue.

Mr Leonard: I thank the Minister for that answer, although it was slightly disappointing. However, will the Minister further assure us that if there are genuine ideas for raising money here, he will seek assurances that that money will not be lost in Westminster's coffers and that the region will be better off in net terms?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member makes a very good point. We could do things to raise money, but, because of Treasury rules, the money raised would simply come off the block grant. We have to be inventive by looking at ways in which we can raise money so that it stays in Northern Ireland. There is no point in imposing the pain of raising revenue simply to find that it comes off the block grant. I hope that Ministers and Departments will be inventive on that. However, when we try to raise money by charging more for services, there will be some pullback from those affected and there will be complaints that they do not want to pay more for services.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister indicate whether he believes that raising additional tax, in whatever form it might take, could take more money out of the economy and out of circulation, delay recovery and, perhaps, even cause more job losses? Could it potentially cause the tax revenue possibilities to be lost?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member makes a very good point. It is for that very reason that I would prefer us to address budget pressures by looking for efficiencies, and that we should be dipping our hands into other people's pockets only when we have exhausted other possibilities or are satisfied that we have achieved as much efficiency as possible. I prefer that people spend their own money rather than us taking it and spending it for them. However, there are certain services that people want, value and continually indicate that they want the Executive to provide. It would be irresponsible of us to say that those services can be provided for nothing. If they are valued by the community, they have to be paid for in some way. However, raising revenue should not be the option of first resort. It should be the option of last resort.

Dr Farry: Such is the scale of the challenge that we have to look at savings and at revenue raising. Will the Minister explain to the House why the Executive seem determined to look at almost every conceivable revenue-raising option apart from the most obvious one, which is water charging. That is the biggest distortion when one looks at household expenditure here compared with that in the rest of the UK. It has been supported by a large number of economists and business leaders, and it can be progressive.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I admire the Member's persistence on this issue. Even though his party appears to be wandering away from him on it, at least he is consistent. I think that he knows the answer to the question, which is that a number of parties in the Executive feel that they have made a commitment not to introduce water charges. Therefore, it has not been an option. I do not even think that the Member would suggest that water charges should be introduced all in one go, so the revenue that would be raised in the first number of years would probably be quite low, as the charges would be phased in. However, I am sure that the Member will persist in this battle, even though his colleagues desert him, and he will make the point time and again.

Banks

4. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of how open and transparent local banks have been in relation to queries and requests for information from his Department. (AQO 648/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: When I read that question, the phrase that sprang to mind was:

"Great minds think alike; fools seldom differ."

Since I have already answered that question for one of the Member's colleagues, I do not know whether it is a case of great minds or fools, but I will leave people to judge that.

As I said before, the availability of finance is vital to our economic recovery. It remains strategically very important, particularly in light of events in the Irish Republic. In that context, my Department liaises with local banks, especially on information about lending to small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland. The cross-sector advisory forum made a number of recommendations. In fact, just before I came here I had a meeting with members of the Institute of Directors to talk about a dinner that I am going to have with representatives of the banks next week to talk about the implementation of the 17 recommendations that came from the cross-sector advisory forum. That forum places great emphasis on banks increasing their lending and being more transparent about what they do in lending to small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. Some small and medium-sized businesses are having difficulties getting loans from banks. Has the Minister made any representation to the British Government about the relevant powers being devolved to this Assembly to ensure greater accountability from the banks and the financial sector?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: First, I do not believe that devolving banking powers to the Assembly would remedy the situation at all. One has only to look at how ineffective the Government at Westminster or, indeed, the Government in the Republic have been. Both poured billions of pounds into banks yet have not been all that effective in determining how that money has been used. In fact, to the anger of the community, that money appears to be more readily used for fat bonuses for people who are involved in banks rather than for distribution and lending to some of the smaller industries. However, through the bank lending panel, the banking review and the work that we have done in the cross-sector advisory forum on local banks, we have sought to try to hold their feet to the fire to provide information and to raise questions where there has been an inadequate response from the banks to the borrowing requirement of businesses in Northern Ireland.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister share the public anger, not just in Strangford but elsewhere, about banks calling in successful small and medium-sized enterprises and changing the terms of their overdrafts and loans without any consultation, thereby putting small and medium-sized enterprises that have never before defaulted in a position where they are now likely to go bust?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: First, the description that the Member gave is not unique to Strangford. I am sure that representatives around the Chamber could cite examples of businesses that have made representations to them. I have had the same response from businesses in my constituency. Indeed, I met bankers to discuss some of the problems that constituents have drawn to my attention.

Of course I am concerned about it. That is one reason why, along with the Bankers' Association and the various industry representatives on the cross-sector advisory forum, I am going next week to meet the decision-makers at the

banks to see what can be done and, in fact, to hold them to the timetable that has now been laid down for implementing a lot of the recommendations for improving the banking system, which came from representatives of the industry themselves. Without that, we will not get out of the current problem. It is not just what the Executive do with their Budget that is important, but the oil for the wheels of the economy, which comes from the banks. That is important, too, if we are aiming for economic recovery.

Mr A Maginness: Given the bail out of the banking system in the South and the recapitalisation of the Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Banks in particular, what are the implications for the banking sector in Northern Ireland? Does that provide greater certainty and confidence and recapitalisation here?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Any additional liquidity that goes into the banking system is important, because that liquidity gives the banks the ability to lend. However, the counter to that has been all the speculation about how weak the banking system is and the lack of confidence. We could find that more and more people will withdraw funds when they get the opportunity to do so and that liquidity will, therefore, not be improved at all. In fact, it could be made worse.

Last week, Arlene Foster and I met one of the Treasury Ministers to emphasise that, if the UK is putting £7 billion into the Irish coffers for either sovereign debt or the banks in the Irish Republic, certain conditions should at least be attached. Two of those conditions are that, first, some of the liquidity that is made available should come to banks in Northern Ireland and should not simply be confined to banks that are operating in the Irish Republic, and, secondly, when it comes to restructuring the banks, the jobs of people who work in banks in Northern Ireland should be considered as well. Northern Ireland should not be seen to be closing down branches just to save money.

Budget 2011-12

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the legal consequences if the Executive fail to agree a Budget by March 2011. (AQO 649/11)

7. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the consequences for public services of failing to provide a draft Budget to the Assembly within the time frame previously outlined by the Minister.

(AQO 651/11)

3.00 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 7 together.

The consequences of not having a draft Budget released to the public are very serious. First, as I have outlined, the lack of certainty will cause great distress and trauma in the economy. Secondly, the later we leave it, the more difficult it will be to meet our legal obligations to have proper consultation and discussion on the Budget. Thirdly, if we fail to meet the deadline of the end of the year, it will fall to my Department to issue an emergency Budget which, I assure you, because of the percentage of money we will be allowed to issue, will be much more severe than what we are considering at present.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time.

Mr W Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, a Cheann Comhairle, you referred to my non-attendance at OFMDFM Question Time. I was not in attendance because of extreme weather conditions in South Down. Indeed, members of your own staff could not make it in to work from Newcastle. I think that it is unfair to be lambasted for something beyond my control. I recognise that I should have withdrawn the question, and I apologise for that.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member very much for his point of order. That is what it is all about: informing my office or the Business Office of the absence of a Member. That is all we are asking. That is the way forward.

The next item on the Order Paper is —

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House welcomes Mr Willie Clarke's explanation for yesterday, and it clarifies the situation. As you know, there was much concern in the Procedures Committee about Question Time. I congratulate Members and Ministers on being so prompt and efficient in their responses and your good self, Mr Speaker, on intervening and keeping them going along.

Mr Speaker: This seems to be confession time.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to comment on the point Mr Ken Robinson made. Today's business at Question Time was carried out most efficiently, and the Procedures Committee and you should be commended for the work done in relation to that. Has the Member who was stranded yesterday ever heard of the e-mail or telephone system?

Mr Speaker: A point well made.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Member for East Antrim to use flattery to try to wheedle his way into your affections in order to be called more often to speak in the Assembly?

Mr Speaker: Let us move on.

Private Members' Business

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward proposals to secure neighbourhood renewal funding beyond March 2011.

As we are all in confession mood, perhaps I should start with a mea culpa before I proceed. The motion is timely because many groups involved in neighbourhood renewal are wondering what their situation will be after March 2011. The uncertainty about funding for neighbourhood renewal seems to have been a continuing and recurring theme over the past number of years. It can be very disheartening to groups but, despite that, they continue to deliver. Communities have demonstrated a clear and energetic response to neighbourhood renewal.

Last night, I attended the annual general meeting of a community group in Newry that is very proactive. It has instigated innovative projects in the area that have led to very positive outcomes. Once again, this is a group trying to deal with future planning but very much in the dark when it comes to future funding for neighbourhood renewal-led projects.

With regard to funding and plans for a neighbourhood renewal strategy, the Department for Social Development has stated:

"It is the Department's intention to continue funding Neighbourhood Renewal after 2011."

The Department's bid for funds for 2011-15, as part of the Budget 2010 exercise, demonstrates a continuing commitment to the programme. The DSD has once again reiterated that neighbourhood renewal is the Executive's flagship programme for tackling

spatial deprivation and that it will seek greater collaboration with other Departments to reduce duplication, prioritise the needs of the disadvantaged and improve the value for money delivered by service providers, including those in the community and voluntary sector.

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

The Department for Social Development went on to say that it is unhelpful that funding for disadvantaged communities is worked out over the head of those communities without reference to other Departments in a way that fails to draw on those people's best experience and may ultimately fail to deliver necessary outcomes. I am not absolutely sure what that is intended to explain.

Considering the number of debates and questions over the past three and a half years on neighbourhood renewal, it seems that DSD has already made some efforts to deal with most if not all of the issues. In an answer to a question posed by my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín on whether neighbourhood renewal funding will continue after March 2011, the Minister stated:

"It is my intention to continue funding the NR programme after 2011 and my Budget 2011-15 bid demonstrates a continuing increased commitment."

However, we do not know what the bid is or whether the level of commitment depends on the amount of the bid. Perhaps we could get an explanation of that.

As a flagship programme of the Executive in tackling disadvantage, the neighbourhood renewal programme is essential at a time of recession, with potentially fewer public sector jobs, and in order to maintain stability in addressing poverty and disadvantage. Executive colleagues should work collaboratively with the Government and with the community. The absence of that collaboration carries a risk of a fragmented, partial and unsuccessful approach.

In light of all the rhetoric, I ask the Minister for some detail of what papers etc, he has brought to the Executive. Has he spoken to other Ministers regarding their support, particularly in relation to funding for neighbourhood renewal? The Minister appears to have left questions unanswered, and that has created huge uncertainty in the groups that are tasked with the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. I have witnessed in my constituency the tremendous

and essential work carried out by those groups and indeed groups throughout the Six Counties. Their contribution in helping to develop our communities is immeasurable. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move the following amendment: After “renewal” insert “and small pockets of deprivation”.

Small pockets of deprivation (SPOD) are an important part of the neighbourhood renewal programme, particularly in disadvantaged communities in my constituency. I will pick up on a comment from the proposer of the motion, who wanted urgent action so that future funding for neighbourhood renewal would be finalised. I agree that that needs to be completed quickly. However, it must be pointed out that that applies not only to neighbourhood renewal but to all public funding. Until the Budget is finalised, no community organisation, voluntary organisation, Department or statutory organisation knows what its funding will be. It is important that the Budget is finalised. While there is no Budget, there is uncertainty. I suspect that many people involved in this area may be receiving protective notices, possibly prior to Christmas, because they do not know their future. It is important that responsibility is taken, that a draft Budget is put on the table and that decisions are taken.

Mr Brady: People in the voluntary sector being put on protective notice is nothing new. It is, unfortunately, a recurring and continuing theme, which should have been addressed a long time ago. I also say to the Member that we have no particular problem in supporting the amendment and the inclusion of small pockets of deprivation.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member. Although many are aware of large-scale areas of need, particularly in the conurbations of Belfast and Londonderry, there is an equally large number of pockets of deprivation. I understand that, using the NISRA reports and the Noble indices, 17 areas were identified where small communities were living in areas of need and required support. That has been recognised. Some 36 neighbourhood areas in the most deprived wards across Northern Ireland were identified, as well as those 17 areas with small pockets of deprivation. I was pleased that the January 2005 consultation report into developing new neighbourhood renewal policy addressed the inequality issues of possible exclusion and that

it was agreed to proportionately fund those small pockets. To have done otherwise would have been discriminatory.

Although relatively small amounts of funding for those communities may be involved, nevertheless, it is significant in assisting them to improve their local area. To date, parts of the Sunnylands, Gortalee and Larne Central wards in my constituency have benefited from that fund. It is important that funding has been available. Rather than its being delivered by a formal strategy partnership organisation, which would involve administrative costs, it has been accepted that, given the small amounts of money involved, other and more efficient methods should be used to cut down that administrative burden. That could involve funding that comes directly from the Housing Executive and councils and even from the Department for Social Development-funded community forum.

Groups such as the Dixon Park residents association in Larne and the Riverdale residents association have benefited from the funding. Larne Borough Council was able to improve the local environment considerably by upgrading the riverside walk, which enhanced access to the local community. The funding also gave additional support to Sunnylands Nursery School, Carrickfergus Community Forum, Greenisland Knockagh Youth Centre, the library and the community council, which had a rather ageing hall. Relatively small amounts of money made a big difference to those deprived communities. In addition, support was given to the Alphabet Playgroup in Greenisland for, I think, an outdoor soft-play facility, which will benefit young people in the estate. Furthermore, the Greenisland scout hall received additional money. I am illustrating how a lot of small community organisations have benefited from the fund.

I noticed that, in 2009-2010, there were no applications from Larne. It would be helpful to have an understanding of why no funding went to Larne. I understood that it would still have qualified, but I am curious about why no funding was drawn down. At the same time, important funding is continuing to be delivered in the Carrickfergus area through a YMCA project that operates out of the Sunnylands Youth Centre. It works with parents and young children and provides additional educational courses that have enhanced people's confidence. Some have

been encouraged to seek employment or to get on to an educational or employment ladder.

That element of funding has been important in that it has provided additional community support. Part-time development workers have been provided in some of those disadvantaged communities. It is an area in which Peace II funding has ended and full-time community development workers are no longer in place. The provision of support to the local community has been vital, particularly as there is a relatively weak community infrastructure. The support has enabled those communities to come together to apply for some other funding, which they would not otherwise have done. Therefore, there is an important need for that type of funding to continue in that area.

I think particularly of the work of Stevie Harrison, who operates through Carrickfergus Community Forum. He has worked with a group of young people who could easily have become young people not in education, training or employment. He has gathered them together, increased their confidence, given them some life skills and anti-racism training and empowered them so that they could learn about their importance to their local community and contribute to it. I was fortunate to be present a couple of weeks ago when he brought a group of those young people to Carrickfergus town hall. It was clear that their confidence had grown, because they were able to speak to a group of over 100 people in a town hall. They had certainly been empowered. Therefore, neighbourhood renewal is an important element in my community.

3.15 pm

Areas at risk are another important aspect of neighbourhood renewal. I understand that about 20% of funding has gone towards other disadvantaged communities in the 10% to 20% identified areas of need, which has been quite significant for recent work in the Larne area, particularly in the Craig Hill/Antiville area. During the summer, I was fortunate to go along and learn about the progress there, particularly the work of Patricia Brennan and Ledcom, which administers the scheme on behalf of DSD. Opportunities for volunteering in the area have been mapped, and people with time and skills have been drawn together to try to improve their local community. Local churches have also been

drawn in to utilise their skills. So there is a real sense of community and hope there.

At the same time, one of the most positive aspects of change that I have noticed in the programme is that paramilitary murals are coming down. Individuals are gaining confidence in themselves and their community. Peace is being secured with relatively small amounts of money, and it is vital that that continues. Areas that have received funding are also covered by the Horizon Sure Start programme, of which I am a committee member. Other organisations recognise that there is need there, and they are working with different age groups. To ensure that change happens and improvements come about, it is important that a collective operation works with a range of individuals and young people in the area.

Having looked at the new NISRA indices, I recognise that there has been change. Some areas are now identified as being among the 10% most deprived wards, whereas others have moved out of that category. Nevertheless, I note that a considerable number of wards in my constituency, East Antrim, appear to be in the 10% to 20% at-risk category, including Ballyloran, Love Lane, Killycrot, Antiville, Eden, Sunnylands, Gortalee and Blackcave: a host of places. If anything, conditions in my constituency have worsened. I view pockets of deprivation funding as being relatively small amounts of money. It is vital that it continues, in order to strengthen my community.

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

Mr Beggs: I ask Members to support my amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social

Development (Mr Hamilton): I shall begin by outlining some of the views expressed by the Social Development Committee about neighbourhood renewal, before a quick costume change into a DUP MLA.

The House will be well aware that the Social Development Committee considered the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy earlier in this mandate. The Committee produced a report that was debated and approved by the Assembly in March 2009. Among the report's wide-ranging findings, the Committee concluded that a neighbourhood renewal strategy was important for tackling

deprivation in some of the poorest wards in Northern Ireland. As Members are aware, the idea behind neighbourhood renewal was to replace short-term, project-led interventions with a longer-term strategy. The strategy was supposed to tackle the multiplicity of factors that affect deprivation and the so-called quality of life gap between neighbourhood renewal areas and the rest of Northern Ireland. Those factors cover familiar social development territory, such as vacant housing, derelict industrial sites, income deprivation and low community participation. However, neighbourhood renewal was also designed to tackle related matters, such as high crime rates, low educational attainment and low life expectancy.

The motion refers to funding for the strategy. In its response to the Committee's report, the Department gave a budget commitment up to March 2011 for projects meeting priority need. The Department also identified a list of capital projects designed to improve the physical appearance of deprived areas. In September 2010, the Committee was pleased to note a number of departmental capital bids relating to the neighbourhood renewal strategy for the next Budget period. The Committee also noted the Department's continued commitment to funding the strategy, as set out in correspondence in October. I hope that, in his response, the Minister will give further information on how, in delivering neighbourhood renewal, he will prioritise the needs of the disadvantaged and improve the value for money delivered by service providers, including the community and voluntary sector.

In my remaining time, I shall make some comments in a personal and party capacity. My earlier point about replacing short-term, project-led interventions leads me to highlight the lack of success that that approach has had in tackling deep-rooted disadvantage in some of the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we should all welcome the replacement of that with a longer-term strategy. Even though I have no particular direct experience of neighbourhood renewal in my constituency, I have experience of the small pockets of deprivation programme, which I will address in a minute or two.

I have met representatives from neighbourhood renewal areas, and, although they have the odd complaint — we hear regular complaints from

them — they are as one in welcoming the fact that long-term commitments have been made to their areas. That gives them some certainty. The motion highlights the perpetual lack of certainty in that area of work, which is that there is no specific funding guarantee beyond March 2011.

I take Mr Beggs's point that this is, at its core, a Budget issue. As we speak, there is no agreed Budget. Even if I wanted to, I do not have enough time to open up that issue. However, it underlines the importance for us all of agreeing a Budget as quickly as we can. We are all aware of the uncertainty not just in tackling deprivation and disadvantage across Northern Ireland but in maintaining good projects that have delivered and instigating new projects that will deliver in the upcoming financial period. We know that there are issues. We heard the First Minister yesterday, in response to Mr O'Loan, talk about the uncertainty caused by the issuing of protective notices. There is an onus on all Members to deal with the issue as quickly as possible. I am sure that the Minister for Social Development would, if he could, come forward today to give some certainty to people who are living with uncertainty at present.

I thank my friends in the Ulster Unionist Party for tabling their amendment. I have direct experience of SPOD in areas such as the Glen, Scrabo and West Winds in Newtownards, which the Minister visited recently. I have witnessed the transformation of those areas, which has been achieved principally through the drive and determination of the community but also through the assistance of programmes such as SPOD.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: There is no certainty about the future funding of SPOD. I ask the Minister, even if he cannot outline funding, to say what his plans are for the continuation of that programme.

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

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion and the amendment. Neighbourhood renewal is the Executive's flagship programme to address disadvantage. It is an essential strategy, and it is working. As we have heard, well over 600 individuals are engaged in delivering the services through more than 300 projects,

and 280,000 people rely on the additional services that neighbourhood renewal funding supports. The public groundswell of support for the programme was made clear at the rally of neighbourhood renewal groups at Stormont only last week. At that rally, Minister Attwood told the groups that they should keep up their campaign and widen it to cover other areas of disadvantage, including social housing, child maintenance and welfare.

At a time of growing need, tackling disadvantage is non-negotiable. That is why the more voices that are raised in support and the more the groundswell grows, the better. At every level and primarily through Minister Alex Attwood and Margaret Ritchie before him, the SDLP is committed to the neighbourhood renewal programme and to ensuring that funding is continued well beyond 2011. Indeed, Alex Attwood has made it absolutely clear that he will continue to advance the programme at the Executive in order to secure the £20 million a year in revenue that goes into the relevant communities that are in need.

The SDLP believes that those in need must not carry the burden of Budget reductions. Any loss in neighbourhood renewal funding could result in that outcome. We will continue to work to convince everyone that money should go into areas of need, and, as recent community support demonstrates, neighbourhood renewal should be the strategy for doing so.

That brings me to my next point, which is about the plans of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a so-called community renewal fund. In other words, it is a proposal that was developed by Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness to fund certain groups in republican and loyalist areas. The SDLP believes that such a fund would be exclusive and elitist in design and would be a backward step. It seems that the proposal was developed over the head of Departments and, indeed, over the head of the community. That is the wrong approach. A joined-up approach is needed, and neighbourhood renewal is now the established mechanism for the delivery of programmes to combat disadvantage. That is why I support continued neighbourhood renewal funding through 2011 and beyond.

I will address the need for a joined-up approach in a little more detail. Although the Department for Social Development has a key role in

implementing the neighbourhood renewal programme, it is not the sole responsibility of DSD to address the needs of the disadvantaged here. Other Departments and, indeed, their agencies must work with DSD to address the needs that are outlined in the action plans for each of the 36 neighbourhood renewal areas. Therefore, I welcome the fact that other parties have shown their support on the Floor for the continuation of the renewal programme. My party and I hope that, in turn, all parties will make the case for the continuation of neighbourhood renewal funding to all Ministers in the Executive.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and the amendment. I was heartened by the Minister's recent statement that the family of responsibilities in the Department, including neighbourhood renewal, was all about the people, families and communities who are in need and living in disadvantage. He also said:

"If one essential value of the Budget is not to protect them, it will not be much of a Budget, and we will not be much of a Government." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 58, p63, col 1]

I hope that the Minister's response this afternoon will contain similar sentiments. The lack of Executive agreement on the Budget is causing a lot of uncertainty and concern for everyone, particularly for projects that await decisions on funding. If the Budget is not sorted out soon, staff will, come January, have to be given protective notices in case funding is not forthcoming.

The past few years have been difficult for neighbourhood renewal partnerships, which have received funding on a year-by-year basis. The lack of certainty about funding each year has meant that many neighbourhood renewal partnership projects have remained short-term. They have kept ticking over rather than driving forward strategic and longer-term actions. Those short-term actions, by their nature, may not have any substantial impact on their communities. The short-term funding has also resulted in the quick turnover of staff, as I have seen. Uncertainty about job security results in a lack of continuity not only in work programmes but in their relationships with project users in their community. It is important that funding continues beyond March 2011 and that the Minister makes a commitment that neighbourhood renewal will be given long-term stability through its funding for the next four years.

Neighbourhood renewal partnerships target communities in the 10% most disadvantaged urban wards. Those communities will be disproportionately affected by public expenditure cuts because they are more likely to use statutory services. They will also be hardest hit by the proposed welfare reforms, namely the benefit reductions. They will be pushed out to work when there is none. At a time of deepening hardship, neighbourhood renewal should be strengthened rather than diminished to support those communities in need.

Despite some criticism, neighbourhood renewal partnerships have made positive inroads into lifting many people's quality of life. In my South Belfast constituency, numerous projects in education, training, community development and health and well-being have been highly effective and have benefited many people. We perhaps need to put new impetus into neighbourhood renewal partnerships to empower those communities to address the issues of deprivation that they have worked so hard to identify.

3.30 pm

We also need commitments from other Departments, such the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, to stop paying lip service and to put more resources into realising the targets that are deemed necessary by partnership action plans. Departments need to send senior staff to the partnerships rather than personnel who are unable to make decisions on behalf of their Departments.

The South West Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership in south Belfast is proactive in assessing the action plans that identified what has been achieved to develop a revised action plan and to ensure that priorities are achievable and realistic. Perhaps there is a need for more collaboration between partnerships and projects to focus on issues across the whole area, such as health and education, to cut down on duplication and to focus resources. That may save statutory bodies from stretching their manpower and perhaps improve their attendance and participation.

Mr Easton: I support the motion and the amendment. Since the neighbourhood renewal scheme was launched in June 2003, it has helped many areas in Northern Ireland to tackle disadvantage in their communities. Deprivation

exists in every country, but Northern Ireland is a special case after 30 years of community division, violence and sectarianism. That has had a profound effect on the social and economic opportunities that are open to people who live in areas of disadvantage.

My area is often referred to as the "gold coast", but that is far from the case, and, since my election to the House in 2003 and re-election in 2007, I have worked hard for many communities in north Down, including Kilcooley, Rathgill, Bloomfield, Whitehill and Breezemount in Bangor, Beechfield in Donaghadee and Loughview in Holywood to name but a few. Many of those areas have never been included as part of the neighbourhood renewal scheme, despite having the same problems as Kilcooley.

Kilcooley has benefited greatly from neighbourhood renewal schemes, and those benefits are visible. However, it is still not finished, and much work remains to be done. There is now a strong and vibrant community there working for the betterment of its areas and the benefit of its people. That is down to the local community association, various groups and Kilcooley's neighbourhood renewal community worker, Mark Gordon, who is doing a fantastic job. The Minister for Social Development has visited the area on numerous occasions and seen the benefits of the scheme for himself.

The scheme should be renewed. It is vital for the many areas of disadvantage across Northern Ireland, never mind north Down. The scheme aims to tackle the complex nature of social deprivation and has four main objectives. The first of those is community renewal to develop confident communities that are able and committed to improving the quality of life in the most deprived neighbourhoods. A second aim is economic renewal to develop economic activity in the most deprived neighbourhoods and to connect them to the wider urban community. A third aim is social renewal to improve social conditions for people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods through better co-ordination, public services and the creation of safer environments. A fourth aim is physical renewal to help to create attractive, safe and sustainable environments in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

OFMDFM's programme for cohesion, sharing and integration is evidence of the fact that much

work needs to be done and that deprivation is a factor in sectarianism and violence. We must not lose focus but enhance the work that has gone on in the past so that it continues after March 2011.

The report by the Committee for Social Development on the neighbourhood renewal strategy, which was completed in February 2009, came up with many recommendations. Much of those focused on setting targets and adhering to them. It was found that this had been lacking in previous years and that setting of targets would also contribute to measuring success. It was also noted that a significant amount of money had been set aside for the scheme and that it was important to keep track of spending. Implementation and better use of funding was considered to be down to good organisation reflected in governance, which has been lacking. There was also believed to be a severe lack of communication and support for groups from the top down.

As we move forward, all those recommendations need to be adhered to. That will be to the benefit of the local community in receipt of the scheme. I am not immune to criticism, as highlighted in the Committee report, but I am a firm believer that the scheme has benefited many communities across Northern Ireland since 2003.

I am glad that we are also talking about SPOD. It would be remiss of me not to mention the great work that Karen Worrall does on that front with the community in Rathgill, Bangor. It would also be remiss of me not to mention the new areas at risk initiative in Beechfield, Donaghadee, which the previous Social Development Minister Margaret Ritchie launched almost two years ago. That also needs to be protected, and I hope that the Minister takes that on board.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion and the amendment. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the motion. It states:

"That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward proposals to secure neighbourhood renewal funding beyond March 2011."

The tone of the debate thus far has been positive, and I would like it to continue that

way. The motion will assist the Minister in his dealings and discussions with Executive colleagues and in securing funding for areas of social deprivation and for targeting social need.

Many examples of neighbourhood renewal have been given thus far, and, as I proceed through my contribution, I will give examples of areas in my constituency that have benefited from such renewal. If used wisely by any Minister, the motion and the Hansard report of this debate could be tools of persuasion in the Budget debate with other Ministers.

Neighbourhood renewal has brought great benefits to parts of the Upper Bann constituency, including Lurgan, Brownlow and Portadown. There are significant pockets of deprivation in each of those areas, and neighbourhood renewal has been used successfully by local community groups to provide funding. It is worth noting that the work done by those groups in Upper Bann is not paid. Rather, all the money received is directed either to capital infrastructure or to programmes on the ground.

Despite some ill-advised criticism from one of my Upper Bann colleagues in an earlier debate, it is worth noting exactly what voluntary community workers in Upper Bann have achieved with that funding. The Southern Regional College received £464,000 for a learning to employment programme, in which the community works with the local college. The college must be congratulated for its contribution to neighbourhood renewal projects in Upper Bann. It has been to the forefront of helping and advising the community and listening to its needs.

Multi-use games areas in the community have made small but significant infrastructural contributions to by providing sports facilities for young and old people. The total amount spent on such projects is almost £80,000.

Brownlow Ltd provides an economic regeneration programme in the heart of Brownlow. That area often receives a bad press, sometimes because of the acts of a small group of individuals and sometimes because of media prejudice. However, neighbourhood renewal has contributed £900,000 to Brownlow Ltd's economic redevelopment unit, thereby helping to create jobs in the area.

In addition, £769,000 has been provided to the Southern Education and Library Board for literacy support. That came about after consultation and discussions with local schools on how neighbourhood renewal could best help them. There have been similar infrastructural projects in Portadown. One such example is Roads Service's collaboration with the neighbourhood renewal programme to make improvements in the area.

Therefore, despite the initial ill-advised criticism, neighbourhood renewal has made a significant change to the lives of the communities in Upper Bann's areas of deprivation. It has shown that local communities can work and provide for themselves when given the resources to do so. Neighbourhood renewal has not only made a physical contribution to those areas, it has given the communities a sense of self-worth. People in those communities have seen what is possible. They know that the way things were was not acceptable, and they now intend to move forward and to make improvements.

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that if we did away with neighbourhood renewal, SPOD and areas at risk, it would lead to a gulf between the community and statutory bodies and between the community and the Government? Does he agree that that would be disastrous?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with the Member. What we have seen with neighbourhood renewal is democracy at work. Through that scheme, local communities have made the statutory agencies answerable to them, and both sectors now work together in a co-ordinated way. As elected representatives, our role is to open doors and to ensure that agencies listen to communities. Through neighbourhood renewal, there is a constant flow of information and dialogue between those two sides.

I am concerned when I hear commentators, especially politicians, saying that we need to agree a Budget quickly, because that is code for saying that we need to agree their vision of a Budget quickly. I have no doubt that a Budget will be agreed, but a process must be gone through, and in these dire financial circumstances, that process must be more detailed and intense. A Budget will be agreed quickly if that Budget is designed to look after areas of need by providing for neighbourhood renewal and protecting the vulnerable, including

those who come from socially and economically deprived areas and those on low wages.

I have heard comments from all sections of the Chamber over the past number of weeks.

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

Mr O'Dowd: Those comments give me confidence that, at long last, we have a focus on and a vision of that type of Budget.

Mr Craig: I, too, support the motion and the amendment. Neighbourhood renewal has a vital role in assisting disadvantaged areas across the Province, and it reflects Northern Ireland's special circumstances after 30 years of violence. Deprivation in areas of disadvantage has long been linked to segregation, violence and sectarianism. Therefore, Northern Ireland is unique and a special case, and it is vital that the funding for neighbourhood renewal continues after March 2011. It is through that scheme that we promote social inclusion and seek to reduce the inequalities in our society.

Neighbourhood renewal ties in closely with the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, which was published by OFMDFM. Some of the goals of neighbourhood renewal are to promote equality of opportunity and to tackle disadvantage, and it is vital that we continue with that programme. It is also vital that we continue with the small pockets of deprivation scheme and with areas at risk, which was the scheme that I was most involved in with the previous Minister for Social Development. All those Members who have contributed to the debate have mentioned the special areas in their constituencies. My special areas are Seymour Hill and Derriaghy, and I pay tribute to the previous Minister who visited those areas, saw their needs and dealt with the situation. I was delighted to see that.

However, neighbourhood renewal needs some work on its delivery. In February 2009, the Committee for Social Development looked at the overall scheme, which was launched in March 2003. It found that, although much work had been done, there was little measurable improvement since the scheme's implementation. I remember thinking at the time that the scheme was very much like a duck that paddles like mad underneath the surface but does not get very far.

There is an issue about how we see deliverable targets. At the time, there was a great deal of criticism of the statutory bodies for not working well enough with the community organisations. However, I am sure that the Minister will address those issues and will help people to move their communities forward so that they can get out of the deprivation that, unfortunately, they have found themselves in.

The Committee recognised that the scheme crosses Departments and involves the Department for Employment and Learning. It recommended that all budgets for the scheme be ring-fenced. However, in the current climate, budgets need to be adhered to and well-defined goals need to be set. If we are to look after the budgets and continue neighbourhood renewal projects, there must be well-defined and deliverable targets.

3.45 pm

I agree with the point made by the Member who spoke before me that neighbourhood renewal projects are critical to the communities that they serve. My colleague Mr Easton rightly pointed out that a gulf will open between communities, government and all the statutory bodies if the projects are not continued. In most cases, that would put communities back not only years but decades. As elected Members, we have all witnessed huge change in our areas. My constituency is unrecognisable today from the place that it was 10 years ago.

At the time, the Committee believed that governance arrangements for neighbourhood renewal were ineffective. If we are to continue to fund neighbourhood renewal, those arrangements need to be tightened up. The Committee for Social Development made 16 recommendations with regard to the neighbourhood renewal strategy. Those centred on targets, measuring results —

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

Mr Craig: — governance and better support. I firmly believe that the motion and the amendment are worth supporting.

Mr McCallister: It is encouraging that the Assembly is speaking about neighbourhood renewal in a united way. Despite differences as regards policy objectives, evaluation and welfare reform, we have spoken with a united

voice today about our commitment to tackle disadvantage and to say that neighbourhood renewal funding should be fought for in the Budget. It is absolutely vital if we are to improve the communities that many Members have mentioned. It is vital that work continues both in neighbourhood renewal and in the small pockets of deprivation scheme, which my colleague mentioned.

I am not sure whether the Minister wants to be linked too closely with the CSI strategy. However, I take Mr Craig's point about the link between CSI and neighbourhood renewal. We will leave CSI for another occasion.

Many Members have spoken about the need to tackle neighbourhood renewal. Policies need to be continued right across the board. Those policies work, and it is right that they continue. Communities need help to get out of poverty. They need help with schooling, disadvantage and employment and to tackle not only need but needs. There are lists of indicators of poverty that show that those communities need and deserve help to get out of poverty.

Neighbourhood renewal has been an excellent example of government and the community and voluntary sector working together to deliver a common aim. Government setting out a strategy and using the community and voluntary sector as the delivery mechanism for much of it is a good model that should continue. I am sure that the Minister is fighting hard for neighbourhood renewal in the Budget review. However, I take issue with Mr O'Dowd's point. We need to agree a Budget. These issues have not arisen suddenly. The budgetary and financial difficulties have been with us for several years now. There have been excessive problems in the Republic —

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that Mr O'Dowd's comments were telling of Sinn Féin's anti-cut agenda in the South in preparation for elections there and did not deal with the failure to deliver a Budget in the North?

Mr O'Dowd: We have won an election.

Mr McCallister: I agree with Mrs Kelly. His comments were more about fighting that election. I heard Mr O'Dowd say from a sedentary position that his party has won an election, but it has not won the general election that is coming down there. For all the citizens who live in the Republic, I hope that they do not win it, or else the country really will be up for sale.

It will be like the old saying, "Would the last one leaving Ireland please turn out the lights?"

I have confidence that the Minister will fight to get and to maintain neighbourhood renewal schemes and will work to build on the successes that we have had, while taking on board the useful comments and recommendations from the Committee, although I was not a member of the Committee at the time. Committees play a very useful role by looking at policy objectives and how they play out on the ground. It is vital that the Minister and his Department take those recommendations on board to see how we can improve this, how we can deliver and how we can help more people out of poverty and disadvantage. That is the united cry going out from the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the election is not until next May.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the motion and the amendment. It is quite clear that neighbourhood renewal is targeted at areas of disadvantage, and it is right that areas of deprivation are included. It is also an issue in rural areas. Some rural areas have a number of commuters living in them who are not part of the indigenous community and do not often get involved in the local community. It is, therefore, important that all areas of disadvantage are tackled.

Does the Minister share my disappointment that OFMDFM is very much behind in its schedule to meet its legislative requirement on the child poverty strategy, which will have to have a quicker Committee consultation period than ought to be the case?

Other Members have said that neighbourhood renewal is not the sole responsibility of DSD. It is not substitution for other Departments, it is about additionality and about other Departments being able to bring to the table projects that they can deliver in a much more timely manner than would otherwise be the case, because they should all be bringing their resources to the table.

Mr McCallister: The Member talked about other Departments bringing projects. The Department of Education's recent nought-to-six strategy has been one of the most disappointing strategies because it looks more like a three-to-six strategy and has missed the mark dramatically in delivering some of what the Member is talking about.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Member makes a valid point about education, because Mr O'Dowd highlighted the sterling work of the partnership, the Southern Regional College and the local schools in trying to tackle the literacy problem. It is obviously a failure of education that neighbourhood renewal money is having to be spent in that way. Had we got a timely early-years strategy, the money could have been put to other uses through the building of real and sustainable jobs in the local community.

Mr O'Dowd: I am glad that the Member has stepped into the field of education. I will educate her slightly.

Numeracy and literacy factors is as much to do with education in the classroom as it is to do with your environment on the outside. If a child is coming from an area where there is not high educational attainment, the likelihood is that that child will not reach educational attainment itself. If you want to have a wee lesson on education, give me a shout some day and we will have a chat about it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that we are talking about neighbourhood renewal.

Mrs D Kelly: In deference to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will not point out the obvious grammar mistakes that Mr O'Dowd made.

The fact is that neighbourhood renewal ought to be about not only improving the environment and the learning experience, but leaving a legacy. Mr O'Dowd was right about one thing: no jobs have been created in the Craigavon area. That is a feature that the Minister must look at throughout the neighbourhood renewal areas.

The whole point of community development is to enable and to empower local communities and to leave a legacy. When community development workers can leave the stage, they have succeeded. I pay tribute to many of the development workers, who often work long hours for no remuneration or for remuneration that is not sufficient and does not meet their needs.

Nonetheless, there is a real requirement, particularly in the Lurgan area. We have a town centre suffering the decline that is evident in many market towns across the North. There is

a need for the neighbourhood renewal money to be spent on economic regeneration, and I want to see that happening.

Mr O'Dowd's other point was about how other Ministers will be all-singing and all-dancing in favour of neighbourhood renewal. He eloquently said that neighbourhood renewal is significant, opens the doors to democracy, and is very much a grass-roots, bottom-up approach to development. I hope that other Ministers will take note of those remarks, and that he will convey those remarks to his own Ministers in the Executive, because it is very important that other Ministers recognise the role, function and importance of neighbourhood renewal and support Minister Attwood in his bid for funding to be secured.

Other Members were right to say that there is a necessity for some certainty about the security of funding, because there are those who depend on neighbourhood renewal for their employment. They will be at risk if a Budget is not agreed sooner rather than later. Even if redundancy notes are issued only as a protective measure by employment organisations, they are nonetheless letters that people do not want falling on their mats at the mouth of Christmas. People need to have certainty around their employment, and I hope that the Executive will get over their current difficulties in trying to reach agreement on the matter.

One other feature of neighbourhood renewal is that it supports areas that suffered at the hands of paramilitaries. Let us not forget that point. It is not about just poverty but about the fact that paramilitary organisations did not allow good work to be done in many of their areas. I hope that, now that peace is secured, everyone's voice across the neighbourhood renewal partnerships will be heard, and not just those of a select few.

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

Mrs D Kelly: I very much support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members not to shout from a sedentary position, please.

Mr S Anderson: I support the motion and also the amendment, which was tabled by John McCallister and Roy Beggs. The question of neighbourhood renewal is one that

every Member could say much about. Many communities across Northern Ireland stand in need. There are a number of reasons why many communities are in that position.

Neighbourhood renewal is not about just targets and budgets. It is really about people from all sections of the community who live in some of the poorest areas of Northern Ireland. Many of those areas are often characterised by poor educational attainment, poor health and shorter life expectancy. Very often, they are accompanied by higher unemployment, lower economic activity, higher crime rates and infrastructure problems.

In 2003, Government, through the Department for Social Development, launched a strategy for neighbourhood renewal in the Province. Three of the areas targeted for neighbourhood renewal — Brownlow, Lurgan and north-west Portadown — are in my constituency around Craigavon. Three neighbourhood renewal partnerships were established across Craigavon and approximately £8 million was spent in those areas.

I should declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council.

In Craigavon, funding was provided for a health and well-being programme, a social renewal education programme, multi-use games areas, environmental improvement schemes, training and employability courses, and economic and community development. That is to be welcomed, but, as with Upper Bann, so right across Northern Ireland, serious issues remain and serious problems still need to be addressed.

I note that, in response to a question for written answer, the Minister said that he intends to fund the neighbourhood renewal programme after 2011 and that he is making bids to enable him to do so.

Only last week, the Minister indicated his intention to explore the issue of parity with respect to the welfare budget. I am concerned, and I am led to ask the question: if he were to gain breach of parity on the welfare budget, and if the consequence of that breach were that some, or all, of that budget were removed by the Treasury, with the Executive left to pick up the tab, how would the Minister finance not only this programme but a number of other programmes? Since the debate is about the continued funding of the programme —

4.00 pm

Mr F McCann: I am confused. Are you asking the Minister to breach parity, or are you saying that he should not breach it?

Mr S Anderson: I am not asking the Minister to breach parity.

The debate is about the continued funding of the programme. We cannot unhitch that funding from the Minister's intention to chisel away at parity. If that is his intention, maybe he can give us some clarity on the issue.

I will turn now to the amendment tabled by John McCallister and Roy Beggs. It addresses what is a widespread issue across multiple constituencies in the Province. By that, I mean that it addresses those pockets of deprivation that are often overlooked, through no fault of their own, but solely because of the areas or housing developments that are along their boundaries.

Although I welcome the investment already made in my constituency, I have to point out that, in Upper Bann, there are numerous pockets of deprivation, where the levels of poverty, educational underachievement and poorer health are comparable to elsewhere, yet they fall through the net because they are bordered by what are seen as more affluent areas. Clearly, that should not continue. Where there are pockets of deprivation, that deprivation is as real and as punishing as in any other area. My colleagues have already referred to areas at risk.

I believe that there is still a long way to go to address the issue adequately, and I call on the Minister to set about that task.

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. In his opening remarks, Mr Brady read into the record a recent press release that I issued as Minister. That must be the first time that a Member from a one party has read into the record a statement from a Minister of a different party, but I thank him for so doing, because it captured a lot of the issues around the debate. However, I differ with him in one regard. He said that people in neighbourhood renewal areas, organisations and employees were being kept in the dark. That is not a consequence of anything that I have done. As Mr Beggs and other Members made clear, if people are being kept in the dark, it is a consequence of the fact that the Budget

negotiations are in the dark and are still not concluded. To go back to what Mr O'Dowd said, that is not a passing point or a political point. It is a very real and genuine point.

Four months from today, 695 people who are funded through neighbourhood renewal could potentially lose their jobs. As Mrs Kelly indicated, on Christmas Eve or on New Year's Eve, up to 695 people — 683 in neighbourhood renewal areas and 12 in small pockets of deprivation areas — may be carrying protective notices in their back pockets or in their purses. That is the reality of people being in the dark about where the Budget is today.

Let us maximise our Budget negotiation with London. That is what I was doing yesterday in respect of the welfare aspect of our Budget, and I will comment on that later. If anything should bring reality and good sense to the Budget negotiations, it is the fact that 695 people in DSD-funded neighbourhood renewal schemes and hundreds, if not thousands, of people in other Departments, including Health, could fall victim to the same circumstance. Therefore, in dealing with neighbourhood renewal and DSD budgets, let us create certainty around all budgets, so that everybody can go forward on the basis of confidence rather than doubt. As Ms Lo said, if we do not agree a four-year Budget, and a one-year Budget is imposed, it will not be much of a Budget, and we will not be much of a Government.

I thank everyone who acknowledged that strategies for neighbourhood renewal, SPOD and areas at risk are working. The fact that it was said with such clarity by Members from all parties is a watershed moment. Historically, going back five, six or seven years, neighbourhood renewal has been caught up in community politics. The consensus on neighbourhood renewal, SPOD and areas at risk is a watershed moment because it breaks free from the notion that one community suffers more need and disadvantage than another. The consensus, which is that funding and strategies must be taken forward together to deal with the particular issues in areas of need and disadvantage, creates common ground.

What happened in the Chamber today and on the steps of Parliament Buildings last Monday represents a groundswell of support for neighbourhood renewal. In that context, I repeat what I said, which has been referred to in the

Chamber. I encourage Members that, if there is a groundswell of support for neighbourhood renewal, it follows that there should be a groundswell of support for all those front line services, wherever they might be located in government, including in DSD.

As Ms Lo said, neighbourhood renewal cannot be divorced from housing. Neither of those issues can be divorced from child maintenance, and none of the three can be divorced from social security and benefit take-up. There is a family of need and a family of government responses to that need, be that through DSD, nurses, teachers or all other front line services. When I send a copy of today's Hansard report to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and to the Minister of Finance, I will implore them to recognise that family of need in any decisions that they might take on a budgetary or departmental level. Let us also ensure that the groundswell of support extends throughout the family of services that DSD provides, because, as much as any Department, and more so than most, it is a front line service provider in tackling need and disadvantage.

Recently, there has been some mischief-making about the Department and my personal commitment to neighbourhood renewal. The fact that it has not raised its head during the debate means that that particular issue has been laid to rest. Let me repeat that the Budget bid that I submitted in July 2010 included a full bid, for capital and revenue, for neighbourhood renewal going forward in the 2011-15 period.

In August 2010, arising from the circumstances of the summer, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and suggested that, in view of the budgetary situation, and rather than duplicating or further dissipating scarce resources, we should work to improve and to refocus our existing initiatives to create the best opportunity for success in areas of need and disadvantage.

Therefore, in my Budget bid, the information that I provided in summary and then in substance to the Committee for Social Development, my letter to OFMDFM, and in every opportunity that I have had, publically and privately, to commit myself and the Department to neighbourhood renewal going forward, I have been unambiguous. Any suggestion otherwise is, as I said last week, party political, partial and self-serving. I am glad

that that issue did not raise its head during the debate.

A number of Members, including Mr Brady, Mr Beggs, and the Committee Chairperson, Mr Hamilton, asked how neighbourhood renewal should be taken forward. I am not prepared just to sit back and to say, "Steady as you go". If there are ways in which the Government in Northern Ireland, throughout their Departments, can do their work and business better, we should embrace that.

That is why I have invited organisations from across the range of DSD's responsibility to look at how they do their work. There are 7,000 charities, 4,500 voluntary and community works, 33 housing associations and three advice networks. That is the scale of much of what DSD is involved in and funds. I have asked organisations across the range of those sectors whether there are ways that we could do things differently. At times, I have encouraged organisations to look at doing things differently, and, on one or two occasions, I have bluntly told them that they should do things differently. If there is a way of doing things going forward that protects budget lines, secures jobs, improves services and delivers better outcomes, we, as MLAs and Ministers, would be neglectful if we did not take those opportunities.

I am committed to the concept and practice of neighbourhood renewal, and I have demonstrated that through what I have done in Budget bids and thereafter. However, in some neighbourhood renewal areas, there are some matters that people need to begin to look at. Without being exhaustive or, at this stage, prescriptive, some questions need to be asked. First, is there an opportunity for more collaboration? Secondly, is there an opportunity for more shared services? Thirdly, are there opportunities to deepen interdepartmental working? Finally, are there opportunities to merge organisations? Where neighbourhood renewal is concerned, as well as in general, those are the sorts of concepts that we as a Government and I as a Minister have to grapple with and deal with if we are going to maximise the benefit to the community.

In translating that into the particular work of neighbourhood renewal, I want to lay down some further principles. When I came into office, I said, and I am saying again now, that it was my commitment that the areas of

neighbourhood renewal that are working best and delivering the best outcomes will get funding for a four-year cycle. I concur with the views that hand-to-mouth, year-to-year funding is not the best way to create certainty about employment, never mind create success with delivery. Subject to the Budget being a four-year Budget and one that, I think, and everyone else in the Chamber clearly thinks, is necessary for neighbourhood renewal, my commitment is that the neighbourhood renewal projects that are working best and that deliver the best outcomes will get a certainty of funding going forward. That includes areas at risk and small pockets of deprivation, which are not being excluded from the neighbourhood renewal funding stream.

Other organisations could develop further, improve their capacity and secure better outcomes. My commitment is that the Department will work with those organisations over the short term, and potentially over a shorter-term funding cycle, to bring them to the place where longer-term funding will be available. That is a responsible position that will help organisations to mature and to fulfil their potential. By working with the Department, organisations will get to a point where they, too, are in a position to have longer-term funding.

Last week, people in the Suffolk/Lenadoon Interface Group said to me that, if one or two or a small number of organisations are not delivering the services or outcomes or are not doing all the work that DSD, neighbourhood renewal and the community expect them to do, it would be irresponsible for a community leader, a political leader or a Minister not to begin to address why that was the case. Those are parts of the principles that, going forward, should inform all our discussions and our contributions.

On such occasions as this, there is an elephant in the Chamber. The elephant in the Chamber is what appears to be a continuing effort to develop an alternative to neighbourhood renewal. It is known as the community renewal fund or some variation of that. What I do not understand is this: Mr O'Dowd said in his contribution that neighbourhood renewal had resulted in a:

"significant change to the lives of communities".

He said that it created "a sense of self-worth"; it had "seen what is possible"; it was "democracy at work", and it is able to:

"open doors and ensure that agencies listen to communities."

4.15 pm

If that is the view of Mr O'Dowd on how neighbourhood renewal is bearing down on the conditions that exist in areas of need in Northern Ireland, the outcome of that should be to build upon neighbourhood renewal, to deepen neighbourhood renewal and to create further resources for it. That is the conclusion from Mr O'Dowd's experience in his constituency and the narrative outlined in the Chamber this afternoon.

If that is what is working and beginning to work in the lives of people in need, that is why, strategically, we cannot create a situation where that effort is fragmented, a new funding mechanism and new architecture are created, and all that architecture and the funding mechanism are developed over the heads of government — because that is what has happened — and over the heads of vast numbers of the community, who tell me day and daily of their frustration and growing anger at the fact that they are now feeling marginalised in communities that were historically marginalised for too long in this part of Ireland.

The consequence of those observations is inevitable and certain. It is that there should be more funding for neighbourhood renewal and that, if there is an alternative funding source, which OFMDFM appears to be developing over the heads of government and over the heads of the community, that money should go to neighbourhood renewal. I am putting down the challenge.

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

The Minister for Social Development: The challenge is this: join me in writing to Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson to say that, if there are other sources of funding that they are aware of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

The Minister for Social Development: Those sources must be redirected to neighbourhood renewal. Let us build on the work on which Mr O'Dowd commented.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the widespread support that has been expressed for the small pockets

of deprivation and for neighbourhood renewal funding generally. Several Members have spoken of the need to have the budgets finalised. We all have to recognise that, in many cases, those who are at the coalface in disadvantaged communities are making a considerable difference. We have to value them, and part of that is to enable them to have a degree of certainty about their employment, so it is important that budgets are finalised and that decisions are taken well in advance of the end-point dates. I think of funding for community forums, etc, where frequently people do not know that there is funding for the following year until within a month of the end of the financial year. We need to plan better, and I welcome those comments from Members.

I mentioned that neighbourhood renewal has an effect on peace, and others have mentioned that it is important in certain republican and loyalist areas. Others have mentioned the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. Neighbourhood renewal can give hope to disadvantaged individuals and communities, and it is important that that funding continues to be available so that some do not fall prey to those who advocate violence as some means of creating a cause for those who may have become disenchanted with society.

I welcome some of the ideas from the Minister in his response. There needs to be joint working between Departments, because smaller groups need certainty and longer-term funding, not piecemeal funding that constantly changes so that they are constantly engaged in working out how to stitch together a programme based on two or three different issues. I fully support that idea, as well as the Minister's latter point that there are huge dangers if an independent funding source is suddenly created, possibly duplicating some of the work, specifically in republican and loyalist areas.

We ought to fund disadvantaged communities through our neighbourhood renewal strategy not through a sectarian carve-up, saying, "You get so much for your community, Martin, and you get so much for yours, Peter." We ought to use the NISRA statistics to distribute funds equitably, based on recognised outcomes and outputs from operating groups. If groups are not operating, I can understand what the Minister is saying: change has to occur and there may need to be shorter-term funding until change can be shown. However, let us have longer-term

funding, projects that are seen to be working and greater certainty so that that good work can continue on improving those communities.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank everyone who spoke in what has been an interesting debate. Parts were predictable, but there were some pleasant surprises. I thank the Assembly's Research and Library Service for its information pack, which brought into focus the Committee's work on neighbourhood renewal. It is a timely reminder for us all. Everybody would probably admit that when we are working on issues, they are very relevant and we know what they are. Nevertheless, it is good to see them outlined in the information pack. We will be using it as a reference point.

Mickey Brady outlined our party's support for the amendment. Neighbourhood renewal is about dealing with the small pockets of deprivation and the areas at risk. It is about making sure that, as much as possible, those who experience poverty and deprivation are not left behind. That is where many of us will probably part company, because of the variations in some of the comments.

In proposing the motion, Mickey Brady talked about the evidence of need, and other Members mentioned that. As Mickey said, it is vital that we look specifically at measures, initiatives and funding that overtly — not behind the door, not shyly or discreetly, but overtly — address poverty and deprivation.

Roy Beggs spoke about the uncertainty around the Budget and about the need to look at the 17 SP0D areas, in conjunction with the 36 neighbourhood renewal partnerships and the areas at risk. He gave some very good examples from his constituency, as did other Members.

Simon — I actually wrote Simon Cowell; it is not Simon Cowell, although I am sure that he wishes that he was Simon Cowell and had his lifestyle. I actually do not watch 'The X Factor'. I meant Simon Hamilton. Embarrassed or what? *[Laughter.]*

In his capacity as Chairperson and as an MLA, Simon Hamilton spoke about neighbourhood renewal, health, environment and community safety. Indeed, he mentioned that capital bids went forward in the September monitoring round for 2011-15. He also spoke about the importance of looking beyond short-term

funding. That is where the credit has been laid down squarely at the feet of the neighbourhood renewal work. If funded and brought forward through DSD and the Executive, it will be one of the projects that people can identify for long-term funding, despite some of the difficulties with it. The motion is about protecting investment in that.

I know that the Minister met some of the groups involved last week. The groups say that some of the ways in which neighbourhood renewal operated were problematic. There was a great deal of focus on outputs rather than on outcomes and, without getting into the jargon of funding initiatives or their categories, workers may have felt that some of the work was merely box-ticking. Although there is a need to report, be accountable and to work according to baselines, I know, from having talked to them recently, that they felt that some of the — there is Simon Hamilton. Sorry, Simon. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that you wish that you had his lifestyle and his money.

They spoke about delivering on the needs that were identified on the ground. Sometimes, in the time that elapses between setting funding streams and reviewing them, other needs creep in and take prominence.

Mary Bradley welcomed the motion and the amendment and spoke about the need for neighbourhood renewal. Mary lives in a deprived area of the North, and she should know how successful the scheme has been in her constituency of Derry. I am sure that she will also know what has not worked. Anna spoke about the need to strengthen the impact of neighbourhood renewal on the ground and the need for additional long-term funding.

Alex Easton is like Fra McCann in many respects. There are two old friends whom Alex Easton introduces in Committee. Fra McCann's two old friends are the words "may" and "shall", and one of Alex Easton's old friends is Kilcooley — I am not even going to name the other one. I feel as if I know Kilcooley very well because of the way in which he brings up the topic. That is exactly what Members should do. If Members do not bring the needs and experiences of their constituencies into the Chamber and into debates, realistically, what is it all about?

One issue that Alex and many others raised is the need for targets to be set, with tracking and accountability and taking on board what works

on the ground. John O'Dowd also picked up on that theme when he spoke about his local college, literacy programmes in schools and infrastructural development in his constituency. More importantly — I know that the Minister also touched on this — he spoke about the avenue and outlet that neighbourhood renewal has provided for what has become known as participative democracy. We call it inclusion — people coming on board.

In many respects, when we read the report and listen to some of our experiences, it seems that we are almost ignoring some of the criticisms that partnerships made. Those include the criticism that Departments and statutory bodies come to the table with nothing. Some, but not all, departmental representatives come to the table and do not bring their contribution. Neighbourhood renewal is led by DSD and is an interdepartmental fund. Given the very nature of the scheme, other Departments have to contribute. For that reason, I wrote to all Ministers to ask what contribution they would make to neighbourhood renewal and whether they will support it in the future. I have consistently done that. If Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson were responsible for neighbourhood renewal, I would be torturing them. As our party spokesperson on social development, I have absolutely no shame and no difficulty whatsoever in leading or organising campaigns. That is my job. We all have different spokesperson roles, and we chase and torture different Ministers. Rather than stamping their feet, people have to be honest about that.

I heard what the Minister said, and I am concerned. I am prepared to give way. Is the Minister saying that OFMDFM or any other Department has no right, and should not try, to develop initiatives that are anti-poverty in nature and that will be complementary and additional to neighbourhood renewal? If they were about displacement, I would not support them. Any initiative from whatever Department will be scrutinised in the same way as this one. Hence, it is about additionality and making sure that there is no duplication and that every initiative meets objective need, regardless of what it may be or what it may look like.

In the same vein, community safety is cited as one example in the neighbourhood renewal programme. Is the Minister saying that, in the new Justice Bill, we should not make provision for community safety or funding for groups and

communities that are trying to establish and initiate community safety programmes? Indeed, the Health Minister is here as well. When it comes to the health aspects of neighbourhood renewal, should the Health Minister not have any responsibility or bring forward programmes that are, by their very nature and orientation, about community development in case it offends the Minister for Social Development and what he is trying to do with neighbourhood renewal? If that is the case, the Minister for Social Development has just undersold, unpicked and unravelled his own argument for additionality.

At the last minute, I am prepared to give way, but only on the basis that it is a genuine offer of a genuine response.

The Minister for Social Development: I refer the Member to my previous comments. The essence of the argument is that neighbourhood renewal and tackling disadvantage require partnership at community, governmental and statutory levels.

That is what has been proven to work, and that is the model that we need to deepen and develop as we go forward. The issue is that what is being developed, in the view of many people, is exclusive and elitist. It involves one Department, one party, and a hand-picked number of groups. That is not inclusion, equality or partnership. In those circumstances, for all the good intentions that the Member and others have, the question is whether it is likely to work.

4.30 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: I allowed the Minister to intervene, but he accuses people of being exclusive and elitist. I refute that allegation. It is on record that I refute it. I bear no shame, and the Committee bears no shame, in asking for additionality.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have absolutely no difficulty in proposing that there should be additionality. The Minister's party, which introduced political vetting, has a brass neck to accuse anyone of being elitist.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister, Dolores and the rest have a brass neck.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Unlike Simon Cowell's 'The X Factor', this is not a phone-in vote.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward proposals to secure neighbourhood renewal and small pockets of deprivation funding beyond March 2011.

Health and Social Care Services for Vulnerable People

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the ongoing reduction in essential health and social care services for vulnerable people; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to tackle wastage within his Department and its agencies; and further calls on the Minister to undertake a review of (i) spending on senior salaries, (ii) spending on travel and accommodation for senior management and administrators, and (iii) procurement practices within health and social care trusts.

As Members know, times are tough all round with departmental spending. In this type of situation, particularly in health, where things are tough, the public are right to ask questions about how the health budget is allocated. That is why the SDLP tabled the motion. Everyone here knows that, in every constituency, cuts to services for the vulnerable are increasing week by week. Home help budgets are shrinking; domiciliary care is being cut; and many residential homes — for those with learning difficulties, the disabled or the elderly — are faced with closure.

The cuts affecting the weak and vulnerable are gathering pace while the Health Service continues to award pay increases and bonuses to senior clinicians and some managers. The SDLP is not prepared to vote for ring-fencing of the health budget until it is clear that the Minister and his Department have taken steps to rein in that wastage in the system. It is in the interests of fairness and justice at a time like this when the budget is under so much pressure that the cuts are shared across the Health Service. There is justification for the perception that unfairness exists in the system, not least because of the reports of the level of spending on trips and accommodation by those in senior management.

As a member of the Health Committee, I am well aware of the excellent work of many senior personnel in the Department and across all

the health authorities. I am also aware of the need to improve their experiences, skills and knowledge of best practice elsewhere. Training opportunities are, of course, part of that.

I am not singling out any individuals for blame, but the public are rightly asking questions about the extent of foreign trips and travel for Health Service staff in recent years, and whether they are all really necessary. We can gauge the strength of feeling about that from the 12 senior nurses who expressed their views through one of our regional newspapers. They expressed strong concerns about the extent of overseas training and pleaded instead for more money to be spent on employing nurses to improve patient safety and reduce preventable deaths. Those concerns are widely shared.

I want to talk about the way in which they had to voice those concerns: anonymously. No names could be given. That, I think, points to a culture and an atmosphere in the Health Service in which many workers are told not to speak out. They are gagged and are afraid to speak. We have direct rule and accountability, and I want the Minister to look at this issue. Everyone should be assured, when it comes to serious issues, that people working in the Health Service should be free to express their views at all times in the organisation. I understand that the Minister issued a directive about these trips earlier in the year. He pointed to the need for some scrutiny, but it is a warning that seems to have made little difference. The trips have continued, and, as we know from recent exposure in the press, the costs have kept mounting.

This news comes at a time when hospital wards are closing and A&E services are being withdrawn: think of the Mid-Ulster Hospital and of Downe Hospital. People are rightly asking questions: they are asking whether all of this is really necessary. Will the Minister tell us whether it is necessary to spend £14,000 on flights and accommodation for three employees in this financial year alone? Indeed, some people are asking why £4,500 was paid in course fees for a conference in Nice that was cancelled due to the flight limitations arising from volcanic ash. I understand that that money has not been recovered, and I would like the Minister to give us his view on the attempts that have been made to recover it.

There are serious constraints on spending in the Health Service as there are on every other Department, but, in the Health Service, those cuts are impacting disproportionately on the weak and the vulnerable. The Minister has individual responsibility for health staff, many of whom work hard and carry a heavy burden of responsibility. I appeal to him to take action so that constraints on spending apply at all levels in the Health Service and not disproportionately on vulnerable people or the lowest paid workers.

I have already said what I think about training. Some of it is essential to keep abreast of developments; I think everyone agrees with that. However, there has to be a more rigorous scrutiny of the associated costs for foreign travel, and accommodation in particular. That is also referenced in the motion. There must also be closer scrutiny of the proposed content and possible outcomes of meetings and conferences, judging from the comments of those senior nurses who I have referred to. They, as Members will understand, are the people at the coal face who know best about the real impact of the cuts. Their view is that the value of some of these courses is very limited, to say the least. We must be sure in the phase that we are in now that all these journeys are really necessary. Can cheaper hotels not be found when it is necessary to travel? There is evidence that NHS staff in England are able to do that when they go abroad for training.

We all know about Northern Ireland's limitations due to the size of our population. We do not have the economies of scale to enable certain courses to be delivered by experts of worldwide repute so that our staff do not have to travel. However, there is no reason why we should not look at other possibilities. For example, the opportunity to combine with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland to deliver courses here or somewhere on the island deserves consideration. By taking such an approach, surely costs, in some instances, could be shared and money could be saved, which would have the knock-on effect of benefiting the Health Service.

I call, as the motion does, for a review of the Department's spending, particularly on the issues that I have outlined. A thorough review will go some way to help protect those who are most at risk against the reductions that taking place as we speak. The motion should help, in some way, to protect the most vulnerable in relation to reductions in healthcare.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for proposing the motion. I am fascinated by the way in which the Health Service operates. The Minister's response to a question that I asked revealed that the health and social care trusts employ 2,492 staff who are paid between £50,000 and £100,000. I highlight that figure because it is quite significant. They are not doctors or consultants — because approximately 920 of doctors and consultants earn over £100,000. All of us would admit that consultants are well and truly needed in the Health Service.

The figure must include a huge level of bureaucracy. Breaking it down further, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust employs 798 of those people, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust employs 356, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust employs 287 and the Western Health and Social Care Trust employs 479. It is an interesting ratio, and I have looked at it and thought about it. Why are there approximately three times the number of people on that pay scale as there are on the consultants' pay scale? That is a question for the Minister to ask his Department. Why are so many people in the Health Service on a middle-management pay scale? It far outstrips a lot of the other Departments; in some cases, by miles.

I pay tribute to the Minister because — and I listened to him yesterday as he stated this fact — in a press release of 5 November 2010, he stated that he had implemented the review of public administration (RPA) and had cut the number of admin staff and senior managers by 1,500, or 57%. Those are his words so I pay tribute to them. There is supposed to be a £49 million saving each year from April 2011. However, an Assembly report found that RPA made initial savings of £5.6 million in management and administration cost in the Health Service. It stated that, by 2008-09, the total trust management cost had risen again in excess of £120 million.

That was the situation before the Minister introduced RPA, so something is going wrong in the system. I do not doubt that the Minister made those efforts to implement RPA, and I do not doubt that he meant to cut administration. However, the figures show that something is going wrong in the Health Service. Is it the old problem of empire building? Civil servants are keen on that. Maybe the Minister needs to revisit that aspect of the Health Service.

4.45 pm

I find other areas to be absolutely amazing. Expenditure on luxuries was referred to. How much money do the Department and trusts spend on art, management consultancy fees, negligence claims and travel claims? The one that astonishes me is the amount of money that is spent on taxis. There may be a good reason for some of them, but the Southern Health and Social Care Trust gives more than £1 million a year to taxi firms, and the Western Health and Social Care Trust spends more than £0.5 million a year. Some of the figures are absolutely astonishing. Is it efficient to spend those amounts of money on taxis? There is a joke about the other taxi service in the Health Service that people use a lot. Unfortunately, it is the Ambulance Service.

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

Mr Craig: Having seen how many individuals are paid so much, I plead with the Minister to look once again at the management structure in the Health Service. Maybe he will cut it back to previous levels, like he did with his health reforms?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the motion states:

"expresses concern at the ongoing reduction in essential health and social care services for vulnerable people".

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A number of Health Committee members cannot be here because of an event in the Long Gallery. Their absence is due to competing demands, not a lack interest. Obviously, I speak in favour of the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to debate such a vital issue. Recently, we debated domiciliary care. Yesterday, we debated the removal of neurology beds, and, today, we debated the impact of budget cuts and restrictions on the most vulnerable.

Last week, in my role as Mayor of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, I hosted an event for disability-sector service users from the area to discuss their experience of accessing health services. They did not paint a very pretty picture. They feel that, when it comes to budget restrictions, they are always impacted upon adversely and disproportionately, and I very much agree with them. As budgets get tighter, the more vulnerable people in society are always

affected. Many Members could quote examples of cases in which they are involved in their constituency that would lead everyone to the same conclusion.

As I said, last week, the House debated domiciliary care packages, and the Minister talked about his Department investing to provide services. Obviously we welcome that investment, but it is simply not enough. The reality is that money is not always spent wisely. In some cases, if the Department were to listen to those who provide a service on the ground, it would find better ways to do things.

The motion calls on the Minister to:

"tackle wastage within his Department and its agencies".

We are all very much aware of wastage in the Department, as we are aware of the high-profile stories that are currently reaching media outlets, especially the recent one about the £5,000 that was spent to put up 17 health chiefs for two night's accommodation in a County Antrim hotel that was only down the road.

Is that value for money? What is the value for money process, and who ensures that value for money is obtained? Who has the final say in making decisions about training courses? We can be sure that the Department's permanent secretary does not have the last call. As we all know, the permanent secretary sent a memo to the Department's agencies instructing them to exercise restraint when considering training courses. That instruction does not appear to have been followed.

Training courses are necessary, and looking to best practice and international expertise is no bad thing. The question is whether there is value for our Health Service. Tommy Gallagher mentioned the nurses' letter that was quoted in a recent article in 'The Irish News'. That was a true reflection of the experiences of front line nursing staff and how they feel such courses benefit them. The nurses said that they were insulted by the ideas that came back from some of those international training courses, such as wearing different-coloured aprons. Such ideas are at the core of basic nursing skills and the nurses did not need anyone to travel halfway around the world to tell them that.

The motion calls for a review of spending on senior salaries, which is absolutely relevant

in the current economic context. The issue of bonuses, or to keep the Minister happy, “clinical excellence awards”, has often been raised in the House. During last week’s debate on domiciliary care, the Minister claimed that my colleague Martina Anderson was confused by the amount of money that was paid out by the Health Department and queried her claim that £57 million had been paid out; but Martina was not confused and neither am I. Fifty-seven million pounds over the past five years is exactly what the Health Department has paid out.

The Minister often refers to the savings that the Health Department has made. He says that he has saved £53 million through RPA, and that the Health Department is the only one that has implemented RPA. However, one hand is saving money while the other is paying it out. I expect that the Minister will say that no new awards are being made this year because there is a review, but that does not mean that the awards that are already in place will not continue to be paid.

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

Mrs O'Neill: Those amounts will continue to be paid because once someone is awarded an amount of money in a bonus it sits for five years without review. Is that value for money?

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

Mr Gardiner: A stark reality faces health and social care in Northern Ireland: by the end of the Budget 2010 period, it will take £5.4 billion a year to provide a safe and fit-for-purpose Health Service. That is £1.1 billion more than in the current Budget before — and I emphasise before — any cuts are made. There must also be a note of realism about the number of efficiencies that can be achieved; listing them is not enough.

It is also unfair to ignore the significant savings that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has already made. It is a fact, for instance, that that Department has reduced the number of its administrative staff by almost 1,500, while the number of senior executives has been cut by 57%. Those significant staff reductions will ensure that some £49 million in savings will be released each year from April 2011.

I recently asked all Ministers how many staff they employed who earned more than

£100,000. I had the sense to realise that although there were more than 900 people in that category in the Health Department, most were clinicians who were paid at normal national rates and that only a small percentage were administrators. Naturally, I asked the Health Minister to clarify the issue for me, as I realised that the Health Department was unlike others in that respect. The Minister told me that 917 staff were paid more than £100,000 a year, not the 934 quoted by others and that of those just 10 — 1% — were non-clinical.

Clinical staff are, of course, paid at nationally agreed rates. That puts into perspective the earlier scare stories, issued by the DUP, that hundreds of staff are on over £100,000 a year. In the DHSSPS, those are largely not administrative staff. Maybe the DUP could, in future, take the trouble to check its facts before engaging in cheap and easy headlines.

As far as the vulnerable are concerned, there has already been action. The new Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) has been established. It will register those who work with children and vulnerable adults and maintain lists of those who are barred from such work on the basis of harm or the risk of harm. A requirement has been established for paid and unpaid employees who work in specified positions to register with the ISA and pay a registration fee. Therefore, the improvements that the motion calls for are already well in train, and I ask the House to take note of that.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion. Scarce resources in any Department have to be used wisely, and, in this case, given that we are talking about vulnerable people, every effort must be made to ensure that funds find their way into front line services.

Travelling to work this morning, I was totally disgusted to listen to the pleas of parents whose youngsters live with very serious and life-threatening illnesses. They have been asking for more help from the Children’s Hospice. When one hears those heart-rending real-life stories, resources must surely be directed to where they are urgently needed. I also heard a chief of the hospice talk this morning about how its funding falls far short of what similar bodies across the water receive.

The Health Department must pay attention to what is required, rather than spending money on luxury trips and luxury hotels. Indeed, all we

have heard in recent times from the local media and newspapers is how much cash is used on items away from what will actually deliver a first-class Health Service, particularly, as the motion states, care services for vulnerable people. It is incumbent on those who run the Health Service to be prudent at all times.

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

I watched the Health Committee inquisition of senior civil servants last week. While the officials answered the many questions, I was not convinced that lessons have been learned. However, I appeal to the Minister — I am glad that he is with us today — to ensure that efficiencies are made in every corner or wherever they can be made, and that money is not wasted but put into the care of our most vulnerable people. That is what today's motion is about, and I fully support it.

Mr Girvan: I support the motion as presented. However, in doing so, I appreciate that we are working in a climate of ever-reducing budgets, and I very much understand that we need to get value for money from all areas. Given that health is very important, it is vital that we do that and deliver money to the areas where it is most needed and to people who maybe do not have a voice to shout or lobby for resources themselves.

In saying that, I know that the block grant is probably being used as an opportunity to focus in on waste and on areas where money is not necessarily being used correctly. I put the blame directly where it belongs: with the Tories and the Lib Dems. They are both represented in the Chamber by parties that have spoken in today's debate.

It is vital that we make proper use of that resource, and all Members who have spoken have identified that certain moneys have not necessarily been used effectively.

5.00 pm

I appreciate that civil servants from the Health Department have to attend some training courses because that will benefit their jobs, but, given that £360,000 was spent on overseas trips, a business case needs to be made to assess whether that stacks up. Councils were mentioned earlier, and, at councils, many such trips are classed as junkets. I do not class all of them as junkets; I appreciate that there

is benefit from some conferences, but, in the case of some trips, I question the reports and the benefits that have been brought back to Northern Ireland. We have the opportunity to run training courses in the Province at the same level as they are run elsewhere, and we can bring others here to deliver courses.

We should ensure that people can get an appointment at their GP and, if they are going for an outpatient appointment or elective surgery, that they will not have to wait for months. Considering the size of the budget, we have to make proper use of the resource available. Irrespective of the size of a Department's budget, there are bound to be areas in which savings can be made. I appreciate that the Minister will say that savings have been made, and I congratulate him for that, but there are areas on which we must put the focus and the searchlight and ensure that we can extract and make the best use of money.

Targeting people who are vulnerable is one of the areas that we need to make use of. Who do we class as the vulnerable? It is the people who do not have the opportunity to speak for themselves. Last week, we had a debate on domiciliary care, which is a forgotten area in that, in many cases, once people are out of the hospital, they are forgotten about. We need to focus on those areas.

I support the motion, and I know — and I hope and pray — that the Minister will take on board that we are still not satisfied with the cuts and the savings that have been made. It was mentioned yesterday that £210,000 will be saved by the cut in the number of neurology beds from 23 to 16. If £210,000 were identified and used correctly, it could make a big difference. I am not necessarily talking about cutting but about making use of the money more effectively.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As this is the first occasion on which the House will hear from Mr Pól Callaghan, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Seo mo chéad óráid sa Teach ar rún a bhaineann leis an chóras sláinte. Mar a deirtear go minic i bPáirc an Chrócaigh, tá an-áthas orm seasamh anseo mar Chomhalta Tionóil SDLP don Fheabhail in áit Mark Durkan.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to address the House for my maiden speech, particularly on this motion regarding the Health Service. I am honoured to stand here as an SDLP Assembly Member for the Foyle constituency, replacing Mark Durkan.

In this House, we have a duty to improve the lives of the people whom we serve. My predecessor fulfilled that role diligently during his 12 years elected to serve in the House. Given the motion, I am particularly mindful of his efforts to improve the health and social care available to people in Derry and across the region. Not least, I recall his efforts to secure the south wing for Altnagelvin Hospital, the Clinical Translational Research and Innovation Centre (C-TRIC) at Altnagelvin Hospital and the regional cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital, which serves the whole of Northern Ireland.

As Members know, behind the big headlines and major projects lies the important constituency caseload, day in and day out. Nowhere is that more important than in health and social care matters, and I intend to carry on the high standard of constituency service and policy advocacy that my predecessor carried out for the Foyle constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker, tá mé fóibródúil seasamh anseo romhat mar Chonallach ag obair ar son mhuintir Dhoire.

As someone from Donegal, I am very proud to work on behalf of the people of Derry, which, of course, was established by an O'Donnell prince, St Colmcille. It is fitting that I speak on St Andrew's Day, given Saint Columba's special role in forming the affinity between Ireland and Scotland. I understand that, on St Andrew's Day, it is traditional in parts of Scotland for comely maidens in pursuit of a husband to throw their shoes at the doors of men. I am happy, however, to assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the laces on my boots will remain firmly tied for today at least.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, as a visitor and a county man, you will need no reminder of the wonderful nature of Derry and its people. Once peripheral, the city has been put at the centre of the digital world by Project Kelvin, and we look forward with excitement to Derry as the City of Culture 2013.

I now turn to the motion, which follows on from extensive coverage in recent weeks of the

amounts spent on overseas trips: post hoc ergo propter hoc. Members may turn to Google for a translation; it is beyond my capacity.

I worked in the Health Service for a time, and I know the vocational dedication and professionalism of the overwhelming number of people who deliver our health and social care services. They deliver compassionate and professional treatment and care to the public. The motion does not target them; rather, it is about ensuring that the system delivers resources to the people who count at the front line and to those who provide essential services to them. The motion seeks better management in trusts, in the board and in the Assembly. That requires partnership between us all where possible and challenge when needed.

The motion calls for a review of senior salaries in the Health Service. We all know that circumstances are not what they were three years ago. People today want a professional of high calibre to lead the Health Service, but they also want to be reassured that pay and conditions are benchmarked against standards that are relevant to today's fiscal climate.

As a new member of the Health Committee, I was concerned to learn that no uniform standard of categorising management cost appears to exist across the trusts. MLAs are guardians of the public purse, but how are we to know how trusts are performing when transparently accountable figures are not available to us? I was also worried that some trusts seem unable to provide specific job titles for band-8 managers. The Assembly must evaluate those matters: how can MLAs in Committee or otherwise drill down into public spending when such information is not available to us? The issue is about confidence and about trusts' ability to demonstrate that resources are being properly directed. I trust that the Minister will take action to address that.

Like other Members, I acknowledge that some training can be secured from overseas only. However, there must be evidence —

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

Mr Callaghan: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought that I had five minutes in which to speak.

Front line training for essential clinical skills should be given priority. I am reminded of the story of the Fisher Company in the US that invested \$1 million to develop a space pen when the Russians simply used pencils. In today's environment, we need to show that we are spending only what we need to spend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Callaghan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I will try to refrain from throwing my shoes at the Minister or at anyone else today.

The core message is that the provision of services for vulnerable people should be of the highest quality and available for those most in need. It is important that those services be promoted and accessible.

The Executive have agreed that procurement policy principles should be guided by a clear definition of public procurement and of the concept of best value for money. Best value for money is defined as the optimum combination of whole-life costs and quality to meet customers' requirements. It is a procurement specification that includes social, economic and environmental policy objectives. Twelve guiding principles govern the administration of public procurement: accountability, competitive supply, consistency, effectiveness, efficiency, fair dealing, integration, integrity, informed decision-making, legality, responsiveness, and transparency. It is important that those principles were adopted and continue to be put into practice in the Health Service.

As a fairly new member of the Health Committee, I found it informative and interesting to hear the permanent secretary of the Department and some of the trusts' chief executives explaining how their salaries were justifiable and provided value for money. Many of their answers were based on the premise that their posts carry a huge degree of responsibility. That is undoubtedly true, but front line staff also have a large degree of responsibility when dealing with their clients, and, like me, they may have some difficulty in reconciling the large gaps in remuneration that are prevalent in the Health Service.

The top administrators also had no problem in justifying the outlays for travel and training. I am sure that those courses can be necessary and valuable and, as was explained, provide savings in the long-term. However, the accommodation costs and the nature of travel need to be looked at and savings put in place. Perhaps it is just that those issues were never really questioned or looked at before, but it is now time to do so.

In any large bureaucracy, there is a degree of waste that can be dealt with. However, perhaps more effort could be employed in the Health Service in looking at areas in which savings can be achieved. The provision of proper care and services for vulnerable people must be paramount. I sincerely hope that the Minister will take all this on board and regard it as constructive criticism. Vulnerable people need and deserve a Health Service that works for them, and that is a view shared by the vast majority of Health Service staff.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Some of my remarks will refer to vulnerable people, who are, after all, at the crux of the motion. Many Members have spoken about everything other than vulnerable people, and they often end up at the bottom of folk's lists.

For most vulnerable people in society, such as elderly people, children and those with learning difficulties or mental-health problems, the crucial principle is the core principle of the Health Service, which is that health and social care is free at the point of delivery. Every year, the Health Service cares for thousands of vulnerable people. For the benefit of Members: the facts speak for themselves. We provide 14 million domiciliary care hours. Those hours have not been reduced; I have seen to that over the past three years, and the Department's spend on elderly people's services and domiciliary care packages continues to rise. The Department has also provided 1.4 million meals to clients' homes; over 650,000 weeks of nursing and residential care; 66,000 day care attendances in learning disability hospitals; and 32,000 day care attendances for mental-health patients. Furthermore, more than 22,500 children have been referred to social services. Those are some of the statistics that show the nature of the need and the demand. The Health Service meets that demand, and the spend on mental health, learning disabilities and other areas is increasing. My budget is being severely

constrained, and I will talk a little bit about that in a moment.

Northern Ireland has the fastest growing elderly population in the UK. Over 250,000 men and women in the population are over the age of 65. By 2030, the ratio will have increased to almost one in four, with almost 83,000 people over the age of 85. The spend on elderly care in Northern Ireland is second only to the spend on acute care, and it runs to approximately £700 million per annum. A rising life expectancy rate brings with it the increasing risk of a number of diseases, such as arthritis, cancer, diabetes, stroke and dementia, that are associated with old age. We should all be thankful that people are living longer because it demonstrates that the Health Service is working. However, it is key that we provide quality extra years for our vulnerable population. As Minister, I have sought to do that over the past number of years, and I have invested in the Cinderella services that care for those with mental-health problems and learning disabilities. I have also worked hard and increased the spend on children at risk and to support families, and I have ensured that care packages are put in place to support those children.

I know that Members like to refer to the spend on domiciliary care and other areas being reduced, but the reality is that the spend in each of the areas that I outlined is rising, as is the number of patients and clients that we support. However, demand is also rising as least as fast.

5.15 pm

Members spent a lot of time talking about various issues, some of which I will address. As far as RPA is concerned, we are reducing administrative staff by 1,700 and saving £53 million per annum. We are doing something that other Departments are not doing and signally failing to do. We are on target to achieve that by the end of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. Management costs for the Health Service in Northern Ireland, as a percentage, are the lowest of all the home countries.

Mr Craig — I am sorry that he has left — quoted a figure for some year in which management costs appeared to rise. However, at that time, we had to deal with Agenda for Change, which back paid our staff to 2004. Therefore, it appears that spend increased in some years when, in fact, the real cost actually decreased.

We have reduced the numbers of trusts from 19 to six, health boards from four to one and senior executives from 188 to 80. That is also reflected in the numbers.

Mrs O'Neill talked about the cost of managers. Mrs O'Neill is an advocate of a united Ireland. Senior executives in the health service in the Irish Republic are paid approximately double what senior executives are paid in Northern Ireland. That is another important point. Mr Craig referred to hundreds of staff on salaries of between £50,000 and £100,000. I can confirm that most of those are clinicians, just as those who earn more than £100,000 per annum are consultants.

Mrs O'Neill also raised her old red herring of the clinical excellence awards. We have national pay deals for our doctors, nurses and, indeed, the overwhelming majority of our Health Service staff. Those pay deals are set by negotiations in London. We deliver those, whatever they are. The clinical excellence awards scheme is part of the pay rate for consultants. I asked for that scheme to be reviewed some time ago, but the previous Labour Government in London did not want to undertake a review.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No, I am talking. Thank you.

The new Government in London are prepared to review the clinical excellence awards, and that will now happen with the support of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The clinical excellence awards are part and parcel of the pay awards. They are characterised as bonuses, but they are not bonuses. They are rates of pay. Consultants' pay differentials are determined by the so-called clinical excellence that each consultant brings to a particular task. We have some top-quality consultants in Northern Ireland who bring cutting-edge improvements to their care.

Travel is another hoary chestnut. We spend £30 million a year on travel. Most of that goes to doctors, nurses, social services workers and other staff, who get paid as they travel about the community doing their work. In the same way as MLAs — such as Mr Gallagher, who travels from the far side of Fermanagh — are paid per mile, Health Service staff are also entitled to be reimbursed. That is where that money goes. We also use taxis on occasions. Taxis are used not least to transport patients such as vulnerable

children who require protection and are not able to use public transport because of the risk of domestic violence and so on. Members throw out lines that we use taxis and use this and that. However, taxis are cheaper and more appropriate in many cases. There are reasons for all this.

As I said, pay increases and bonuses are set centrally in London; they are national pay awards.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Perhaps I will let you come in shortly.

I want to talk about Mrs O'Neill's aprons and value for money. The £350,000 that we spent on the Northern Ireland Safety Forum was almost the sole topic of an article in a local newspaper. I am not accountable to a newspaper; I am accountable to the House.

The figures that I will read were reported to the Health Committee, but I will read them again. The savings in on-site infections are estimated to be £1.9 million through a 54% reduction in the number of cases of infection; on central line infections, which are a major cause of injury, one hospital saved more than £900,000 in one year; another saved more than £200,000 in one year by reducing instances of ventilator associated pneumonia.

Integrated medications management concerns nurses who go round wards handing out medicines to patients. Over the course of a shift, one of those nurses will be contacted on 100 occasions as she goes about her work on a ward. The apron sends out the message that the nurse who is wearing it cannot be spoken to. The nurse who has the trolley of medicines is the one who everybody talks to and interrupts. Due to those interruptions, some patients get their medicines twice while others miss theirs; mistakes are made and patients come to harm. One trust in one year saved more than £400,000 by eliminating drugs waste and reducing the amount of time required for a nurse to go round with the medicines through a simple device identifying the medicines nurse.

There have been a number of savings. The £350,000 per annum was spent out of the budget of £30 million because it has provided real safety benefits.

The other issue was senior nurses and whistle-blowers. Health Service policy requires staff to blow a whistle; in other words, to point the finger and highlight and publicise any unsafe practices that they see. That is not just a policy: staff who witness unsafe practices have a duty to report them and are required to come forward.

The 12 senior nurses, out of a total of 16,000 nurses, who put their names on an anonymous letter have been talked of as a good authority. Those nurses are required to report unsafe practice. I only wish that they would write to or contact me, because that would allow me to do something about it. Such anonymous letters are of little help.

I listened to Members' concerns about management. My Department is the only one to implement RPA; I wonder why other Departments have not done so. I have asked my officials to carry out a post-implementation review of the new management structures under RPA. That is important. With the number of reductions and the management that we are using, it is important to ensure that the design of management in the new trust — the new configuration — is appropriate and is working properly. I hope that that will help to address the issue around management.

Procurement practice is another issue that was in the motion but was not actually raised by Members. I have set up a business services organisation to centralise procurement. We also follow strict procurement practices as far as the Health Service is concerned and as far as Government are concerned. I have spoken about travel, but it is also important to refer to training.

We spend about £150 million on training every year, most of which goes on doctors, nurses and dentists. There is a large training budget, and one is tempted to stop the training, but that would only starve the Health Service for the future.

Those are the issues in the motion, and I have tried to address them. Tackling site safety has shown real benefits and reductions in cost. However, now that the issue comes under the remit of the Public Health Agency, a body that I set up a couple of years ago, I am asking that it ensures that it maximises value for money.

The real issue is not waste; in such a huge organisation there will always be areas of waste. However, as we find those areas, we will

eliminate them. The real issue is that of the budget. I think that it was Mr Girvan who said that the proper use of the resources that we have will do. No, they will not; not by a long, long way. I have said that in the House over and over again. Until Members address the key issue that, if the Health Service does not have enough resources, it will not be able to manage the need as it presents itself. Therefore, we will not have the British Health Service as we understand it — cradle-to-the-grave healthcare that is free at the point of delivery — and we will be looking at a radical redesign of services and a large number of redundancies.

I said that in the House in the past, and I will say it again, and I am not talking about a few hundred job losses. As I look into the future, as things stand, I am talking about thousands of potential job losses and the inability of a number of sites to continue to provide services. We face a radical change to services.

By all means, Members should maintain a sharp focus on waste, because that helps me as I seek to make the Health Service as efficient and effective as I possibly can. However, Members must also focus on the need for a resource that pays for, runs and manages our Health Service. Currently, we are £640 million pro rata behind England in our attempt to run a Health Service that is comparable with the rest of the UK.

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That gap is now likely to grow, and, as it grows, there will be further pain and distress. Currently, Members experience problems when their constituents complain about the lack of provision to address their needs — that is only the beginning.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to make a winding-up speech in this important debate. I thank my colleague Tommy Gallagher for proposing the motion and for bringing it before the House.

Tommy mentioned that we live in harsh, tough financial and economic times. He said that the public were right to ask questions about how the health budget was being allocated. He said that cuts affect the weak and vulnerable weekly, and I can attest to that from my experience in

my constituency. Just last week, I received a phone call from a blind person who, until then, had been receiving help with the preparation of meals. That person had been informed that the help was being withdrawn. For the life of me, I cannot see how the withdrawal of that help constitutes a more effective service that addresses a front line need — it is the opposite. There are bean counters somewhere who cannot see the effect of their actions on people on the ground. That is what we need to be concerned about. As the Minister said, the point of delivery is the important point.

Tommy also said that the SDLP will not support the ring-fencing of the health budget until it is assured that the wastage in the system is being kept to a minimum and that, in the end, it will be eradicated. His point on the spending on travel for senior management and administrators was echoed by several speakers. Mr Gallagher also mentioned the questions asked by senior nurses about foreign travel for training and about whether there was any benefit from that.

The Minister said that there is a culture of whistle-blowing in the Health Service. I do not get that impression. I get the impression that there is a culture of gagging and that people who work in the Health Service are, in fact, afraid to come forward and tell the truth about what is really happening. They feel the need to hide behind a cloak of anonymity before they can reveal the truth. That is not a culture of openness and free speech; it is a culture of gagging to ensure that the truth remains hidden.

It is the duty of the Minister and of everyone in the House to ensure that that type of culture ends and that the people who work in public services, be it the Health Service or any other public service, feel confident to come forward and tell what is really happening.

5.30 pm

Quite often, as public representatives, we hear the official line from officials, but it is only when we drill down to the front line that we find out the truth about what is happening. It is valuable to us as public representatives to be made aware of what is happening at, as the Minister said, the point of delivery, because that is where the service matters. It does not matter in a Committee room here; it matters where it is delivered to the people who pay for it — the general public. Therefore, I doubt the Minister's assertion that there is a free

whistle-blowing culture in the Health Service. To me, the opposite seems true. Perhaps the Minister might take the time to think about that and address that to ensure that the culture of openness that we all want to see there is developed, so that people are not afraid to come forward and tell us what is really happening.

Jonathan Craig spoke of the information that he had ascertained from the Department regarding the number of people in receipt of salaries of over £50,000. If my memory serves me right, he said that there were 2,492. That is an astonishing figure. When the Minister conducts his review, perhaps he will look into that. Mr Craig also said that the RPA had saved £5.6 million but costs had risen to £120 million. He asked the Minister to revisit that issue. He said that he was astonished by the amount of money being spent on taxis: £1 million in the Southern Trust area and £500,000 in the Western Trust area. The Minister said that that money was spent on taxis for vulnerable children, but he did not reply to the question of foreign travel. The Minister issued a directive to his staff telling them to carefully scrutinise the money that was being spent on training and travel, including foreign training and travel. The question that arises is whether the Minister's directive is being abided by. It seems to me and to many in the House that the Minister's directive has been ignored. That is something that the Minister must address. If he issues a directive to his staff, surely his staff should abide by it. It seems that that is not the case here.

Mr McCallister: Would the Member put a ban on foreign travel, given his earlier comments that he would support ring-fencing of health only when all the wastage had been removed? What percentage of administration costs would he consider that to be?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. If he had been listening, he would have heard me say that the Minister issued a directive about training and travel, and I am asking the Minister to ensure that his directive is implemented. Surely the Member will agree with me that that is not too much to ask.

Mr McCallister: Would you put a ban on it?

Mr D Bradley: If you had been here at the beginning, you would have heard Mr Gallagher —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I will not accept references from a sedentary position.

Mr D Bradley: As I was saying, Mr McCallister, if you had had enough interest as a member of the Health Committee to be here at the beginning of the debate, you would have heard Mr Gallagher say that he was not in favour of a ban.

Mr McCallister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was attending a Health Committee event in the Long Gallery. Perhaps if the Member had had enough interest, he would have taken a note of what was on.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but your point has been made.

Mr D Bradley: It is not a point of order. However, Mrs O'Neill, who is a member of the Health Committee, mentioned that an event was taking place in the Long Gallery, yet she was present to speak in the debate. I do not fault the Member for attending the event. I am just making the point that he was not here and, therefore, did not hear what I said earlier.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is wandering slightly from the subject of the debate. I ask him to return to the subject matter.

Mr D Bradley: I will return to the subject of the debate quite willingly. You will agree with me, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it was, in fact, Mr McCallister who strayed from the subject of the debate, not me.

In any case, to return to the subject of the debate, Michelle O'Neill said that, in her role as Mayor of Dungannon, she had recently attended an event at which people with disabilities were present. They told her that their feeling was that their services were being cut back and they were not valued by the system. That is the response that many MLAs get on this issue. The Minister needs to look more closely at that. Often, he simply hears from his officials. He does not get to the point of delivery in order to be aware of what really happens. That is what he needs to do.

Michelle O'Neill mentioned that £5,000 had been spent on accommodation in a County Antrim hotel. She said that we must ask whether that is value for money. I am sure that we would all join her in asking that question: is that value for money? There is only one answer: no; it is not value for money. The Minister needs to ensure that value for money is achieved. His comments have not convinced me that he is sure of that. I hope that, in

light of what has been said in the debate, he takes the opportunity to look again at the issues mentioned in the motion, to ensure that wastage in the system is kept to a minimum and that money spent on training and travel is absolutely essential and of benefit to the system. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the ongoing reduction in essential health and social care services for vulnerable people; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to tackle wastage within his Department and its agencies; and further calls on the Minister to undertake a review of (i) spending on senior salaries, (ii) spending on travel and accommodation for senior management and administrators, and (iii) procurement practices within health and social care trusts.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Home-Start: Ards Peninsula and Comber

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members will have approximately 10 minutes.

Mr McNarry: More than anything that I could say on the subject, a letter that I have received from Home-Start speaks for itself. Indeed, it speaks volumes for the work that Home-Start does, its volunteers' commitment and its staff's devotion. Above all, it accurately identifies the need that exists in the Ards Peninsula and Comber area to keep Home-Start in business. The letter states:

"I am writing to you on a matter of great urgency to families in your constituency. Home-Start in Northern Ireland provides much-needed support to parents and children. The support is required because too many parents live only one event away from a crisis through coping with illness, isolation, poverty, poor access to the health care and local services, or because of the devastating loss or absence of another parent. Home-Start is a community safety net, providing vital support that can help move these fragile families into strong families, giving children the opportunity to thrive. These valuable services are under threat in your constituent area and we urgently need you to help to protect them."

In recent days, politicians, journalists and others have spoken about the threat to front line services. Those families are at the front line.

Funding provided by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which finishes in March 2011, enabled Home-Start in the Ards Peninsula and Comber area to run a volunteer-led home visit service for families with young children who are under stress. DHSSPS funding for the scheme to support families in the Ards, Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy areas was £37,000 in 2009-2010 and £39,000 in 2010-11. The current funding runs until March 2011.

The ethos of Home-Start is early intervention and prevention. The letter goes on to state:

"Current research indicates that early intervention is far less costly than trying to deal with more complex issues that can lead to children being placed at risk and taken into care. This can save various Departments a significant amount of money. Home-Start can support 40 families for the cost of placing one child in care. It is believed that every £1 that is spent on early intervention will save the Government £7 in the future. Our services will therefore save the Executive significant money.

A total loss of funding for this scheme of £40,000 approximately means that it could cost the Government £280,000 in the future. Whilst these funds are very small in terms of departmental budgets, every penny counts towards supporting families. It is our belief that this move will mean families will face even greater hardship at this economically challenging time and will, in turn, cost Departments more money in the provision of other more expensive forms of support.

I am sure that you can appreciate that the loss of funding presents us with the difficulties that challenge the whole ethos of our work and are contrary to our belief in early intervention as the best option for children and families. If this funding is lost, and Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula Area is forced to close, with the loss of support to around 110 to 120 families, there will be no support for parents who have multiple problems to do with child protection, mental health, disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, multiple births, deprivation, hardship and domestic violence.

The funding received from DHSSPS represents around 40 to 60 families being supported for approximately £40,000 in Newtownards, Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy. There are no other family support organisations supporting young families in the Newtownards areas covering the same need. The remainder of the 40 to 60 families are currently being funded via Sure Start to cover the lower half of the Ards peninsula area only. That is reviewed on a yearly basis, and it is not guaranteed."

In the letter, Home-Start outlines the potential impact on families in my constituency, and it presents the 2009-2010 statistics for Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula Area. It states:

"The total number of families supported was 114; the total number of parents supported was 196; and the total number of children supported was 256. The total number of children who will be deprived of services, which is 256, will be deprived should the scheme close, and at least 50 will be deprived if there is no further funding for the most important of all, the families that are in the Ards, Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy areas. They will not have any family support service from us. Sure

Start, whose services are not the same as ours covers only one ward in Newtownards, which is the Scrabo ward.

We hope, Mr McNarry, that this indicates to you the massive impact a small amount of funding can make and how vital it is that our services are not threatened. The London School of Economics reported that the cost to the United Kingdom of failing to look after vulnerable children was in excess of £10 billion. That is money that the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland Executive cannot afford to lose.

We would ask you to lobby Ministers at the Executive table to ensure that these services are not threatened, so that families on the front line can find life slightly easier. This will be crucial in the tough times ahead. At present, volunteering in the community is being widely promoted, especially with the over-50s. This results in huge savings, as well as in promoting mental health and well-being for both volunteers and the beneficiaries.

However, the volunteers cannot support anyone without the backup of training, Access NI checks, travel expenses and ongoing support. This does not come free. What we would really like you to do is put a question in the Assembly about early intervention and the importance of this in order to save money."

That is what the letter says.

5.45 pm

The letter says that I should put a question:

"about early intervention and the importance of this in order to save money."

Mr Deputy Speaker, thanks to you and to the system that we operate, that is precisely what I am doing. I am asking the Minister to rescue Home-Start in my constituency of Strangford. I realise that it is a mighty ask, but he, like me, makes judgement calls. Mine in this case is to support that call from Home-Start, because I believe in and am aware of its good work and of the results that it achieves. I appreciate that the Minister's role is to juggle funding. He has the most difficult task of all the Ministers in that juggling act. I know that in his juggling, not everyone can be satisfied. However, my judgement call today is going further, and, even though I cannot reach him, I am using this opportunity to twist his arm to squeeze something extra out of his budget.

We both know that his Department has written to Home-Start advising that its current funding

arrangements would be reviewed as part of the forthcoming spending review, the outcome of which would be known in the autumn, and that, therefore, nothing could be guaranteed to Home-Start about future funding at this stage. The autumn has passed, and I suspect that the winter will pass also. It will then be springtime before the spending review-cum-revised Budget will either be agreed or not agreed. The funding I am anxious to secure at the moment is a minimum small amount of £40,000 for families in the Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy area.

I know, because I live there. I know the need that exists, and I know the work that goes on there. It really is not the families' fault, and they should not be punished or deprived of funds that are required to help them. I know that the Minister has no intention of punishing anyone; it is not in his character. However, those are the words that must be used in this debate, because that is the impact that is felt. It feels as though it is a punishment of those people for something they are not guilty of. As I indicated, I understand, perhaps more than most, the Minister's situation. However, it is close to Christmas, and it is a special time for all families. My duty is to press the Minister, as I am doing today, and to keep pressing him until he says yes. That is what I am doing.

Mr Hamilton: I want to begin by congratulating my constituency colleague Mr McNarry on securing the time to discuss this important subject. I know that it is close to his heart and that it will resonate far and wide in the Strangford constituency. After Mr McNarry gave such a good rundown of the work of Home-Start, it will be difficult to add anything about the value that I and others and, more importantly, the people of our area place on the services that Home-Start delivers.

In the time allotted to me, I simply want to echo everything that Mr McNarry said and to underscore the importance of the service delivered by Home-Start, principally in the Ards Peninsula and Comber areas. All of us who know the work that it does admire the standard of the service that it delivers, particularly the fact that a lot of it is delivered by volunteers. Sometimes we forget that. We see organisations, and we think that everybody who is delivering a service through that organisation is receiving a wage for doing so. However, that is not the case in so many of our organisations. I think that we would want to put on record our thanks to those in

Home-Start and, indeed, in other community and voluntary organisations in our constituency and further afield in Northern Ireland for the great work that they do day in, day out. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that work often goes without recognition.

For me, the critical point in the argument put forward by Mr McNarry relates to the cost of keeping a child in care. Let us face it: some of the children who are looked after through Home-Start may, if life's events take a different turn, end up in care. The cost of keeping a child in care would run to approximately £2,500 a week. Home-Start is saying that it can provide its services to prevent those children getting caught in that downward spiral, and it can offer its services to around 40 children for the same amount of money. We always want to prevent problems. It is easy to throw money at dealing with the problem at the end; it is much more difficult to prevent the problem developing, but that is where we should be increasingly focusing all our resources. This is a perfect example of where that can be successful.

Among my constituency colleagues who unfortunately cannot be here, Michelle McIlveen, particularly through her role as children and young persons' spokesman for the party, has taken a keen interest in the subject and has written to and lobbied the Minister on behalf of our party. The same situation prevails in Ballynahinch, where there is a campaign to preserve the Home-Start service. Jim Shannon, now the MP for that area, has taken an active role in trying to bring to the Minister's attention the importance of the service delivered in that area. The problem exists not just in one part of Strangford; it is in that new bit of Strangford as well.

This is not the first time that the issue has been debated or discussed in the House, and it may not be the last. I hope that it is the last. Like Mr McNarry, I acknowledge that the Minister faces exceptional challenges now and into the future. Indeed, whoever succeeds him as Health Minister will face equally difficult challenges when it comes to administering the budget. The crisis that we face puts additional pressures on all services, particularly on the sort of services delivered by Home-Start. However, the issue is not necessarily how much funding is received by Home-Start in Ards; it is the certainty of that funding. We have been here before. A lack of ongoing funding has caused this problem at

this time of the year, as it does for so many organisations across Northern Ireland, because there is no certainty moving forward. For me, the issue is trying to drive some certainty into the situation, as opposed to establishing exactitude on the amount of funding that will be received.

The budgetary challenges that we face, which are immense, create opportunities to look not only at what services we will continue to deliver but at who will deliver them and how they will be delivered. Models such as that presented by Home-Start give us an opportunity to look at how others outside what might be perceived as the orthodoxy of the public sector can deliver exemplary standards of service, dealing with some of the most vulnerable people in our society and, as is so often the case, as with this example, at a much reduced cost to the public purse.

My real concern, which I know is shared by others, is that, if Home-Start does not deliver the services that it is delivering in our area, I do not know who will. The short-term saving of the tens of thousands of pounds that go to Home-Start every year may create a long-term cost. That may be difficult to measure precisely, but it is a truism that savings in the short term will be more than balanced out by long-term costs, if that early intervention is not there.

I do not want to repeat myself, but I know that the Minister faces difficult challenges. As we know, there is no Budget at this stage. Work is ongoing to deal with that, and, obviously, the Minister is not in a position to give us any certitude today, even if he wanted to. Echoing what Mr McNarry said, all I ask of him is that, when that Budget is finalised and he has a better handle on what his finances will be for the next number of years, he will give careful and, hopefully, preferable consideration to the cause that was so ably put forward by Mr McNarry. I echo what he said, and I know that it will be echoed by colleagues from the constituency. We ask that the service that has been going on there, often unrecognised and unacknowledged, is acknowledged by his Department through continued funding and certitude about that funding in the longer term.

Mr McCarthy: I will not delay the House any longer than is necessary. Much has been said; in fact, it has all been said very precisely by my two Assembly colleagues, and I support David McNarry and Simon Hamilton. I thank David

for raising the plight of Home-Start. As has already been said, Home-Start serves the Ards Peninsula, Comber, Ballynahinch and further afield. I pay tribute to all the staff at Home-Start for the excellent work that they have done. They have been in our community for years, and all the local children and their parents and guardians have benefited enormously from Home-Start.

It is most unfortunate that there is real despondency among the Home-Start workers at present. Indeed, there has been for quite a while. They are working on a shoestring, and, because of the uncertainty about funding, Home-Start, like all others, cannot plan for the future. That unsatisfactory situation is compounded by the fact that there is no agreement on the Budget at Executive level between the parties. Simon Hamilton mentioned that. I appeal to those involved — particularly Sinn Féin, although none of its Members is in the Chamber — to agree a Budget as soon as possible. Although no Sinn Féin Members are in the Chamber, I hope that they hear my appeal and that of others to get the Budget agreed as soon as possible for the benefit of all voluntary agencies. Yesterday and today, we heard the Finance Minister respond to questions about the plight of the voluntary agencies. Sammy Wilson was willing to get the thing going, but he needed help from his Sinn Féin colleagues — well, I presume it is his Sinn Féin colleagues. So, the opportunity is there. Let the Assembly see what they are made of; let them come forward with a Budget as soon as possible. Every Department needs to know what its budget will be for the next number of years, and then everyone can continue to provide a good, modern service to all who require it.

I thank David McNarry for bringing this subject to the Floor of the Assembly, and I will finish by saying that Home-Start has to be supported and supported now. Closure for Home-Start is simply not an option. I appeal to the Minister to listen to what his Assembly colleagues are telling him today.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank David McNarry for creating the opportunity to have this debate and to take on board the points that have been made.

In March 2001, the then Northern Ireland Executive created the children's fund to provide

direct support to children in need and young people at risk, and they asked the Health Department to administer it on their behalf. Voluntary and community groups working with children and young people were invited to make applications for assistance in undertaking work that would further the aims. In all, around 100 organisations were successful in their applications. Those organisations engaged in a wide range of activities, such as early years work, work with children and young people with disabilities, family support programmes, juvenile justice projects and youth service-type schemes.

Of the successful applicants, four were local Home-Start projects, one being Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula Area. During that period, it was provided with grant assistance in the region of £196,000 from the children's fund to support salary costs associated with its efforts. In addition to funding from the children's fund, as part of the Health Department's core grant funding arrangements, we provided and continued to provide funding to Home-Start's regional office to assist with its central running costs. Funding for all those projects continued until 2008, when the centrally funded children's fund came to an end by order of the Executive.

When the children's fund ended, it fell to individual Departments to consider the future of the projects that fell within their scope. For my part, I saw real value in the work being carried out by a range of projects supported by the children's fund, and I felt that it would be a shame to let them go. That is why I set aside resources from my own budget to provide continuing support to over 40 former children's fund projects that were pursuing activity that contributed to improving outcomes for children and their families in line with the aims and objectives of my Department. Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula was one of those projects that, since 2008, received a further £89,000 in grant assistance from my Department. I will make further funding of £29,000 available to the project between now and the end of the financial year. At this stage, unfortunately, I am unable to guarantee any funding beyond that point, for reasons that Members are well able to understand and appreciate.

6.00 pm

My Department wrote to the project in 2008 to let it know that I had set aside money from

my budget to continue to support its work, but it was advised that we expected it to move, over the period of the funding extension, to a position of self-sustainability. The project was treated no differently to any of the other 40 projects that were funded in that way. The Department is not the commissioner; that is a matter for the Health and Social Care Board and the trust. I understand that Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula has a contract with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to provide services to families in that area in line with the policy commitment of my Department.

Evidence shows that appropriate prevention and early intervention services for parents, particularly in the first three years of a child's life, cannot be overestimated, so the provision fits the need and the requirement of the Department. My Department has a particular focus on Families Matter, the family and parenting strategy. Through that strategy, I invested £2.5 million recurrently to support families through family support initiatives such as parenting education, family mediation, child contact services and a regional family support information system. Much of that is provided through the voluntary and community sector. My officials are engaged with the Health and Social Care Board to ensure that any unallocated funding out of the £2.5 million of Families Matter money is used to support early intervention services for hard-to-reach families and provide not only practical assistance but help in building their parenting, resilience and skill. Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula is well positioned, as an existing service provider, to enter into dialogue with the South Eastern Trust about how it can further contribute to delivering that agenda.

Many of the Members present spoke about the benefits and values of the work of Home-Start, and I join Members in recognising the achievement of all the Home-Start projects throughout Northern Ireland and the dedication of its volunteers in making a difference to so many families and children.

Adjourned at 6.03 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 6 December 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise the House that the Speaker is away on official business today. I also advise the House that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is unwell and is unable to deliver the statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting today.

Executive Committee Business

Planning Bill: First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to introduce the Planning Bill [NIA 7/10], which is a Bill to make provision in relation to planning; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the Consideration Stage of the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the nine clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question on the long title.

Clauses 1 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Tourism (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Tourism (Amendment) Bill on behalf of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is unwell today.

Moved. — [The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been selected, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Tourism (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.

Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Attwood): I beg to move

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

The purpose of the regulations is to ensure that provisions in relation to the pension protection fund administration levy comply with European Union rules. The pension protection fund operates in Britain and Northern Ireland to protect members of eligible pension schemes. The fund makes compensation payments to members of eligible pension schemes where the sponsoring employer has become insolvent and there are insufficient assets in the scheme to cover pension liabilities. At this time, of all times, such protection will be useful.

The fund is financed through levies on, first, eligible defined benefit schemes; secondly, the residual assets of pension schemes transferred into the pension protection fund; thirdly, investment returns and annual levies made up of a pension protection levy; and, fourthly, an administration levy charged to all qualifying defined benefit occupational pension schemes. A small number of schemes do not have to pay the pension protection levy or the administration levy. Those are defined benefit pension schemes with a full guarantee from a relevant public authority, such as a Department, and, therefore, they do not require the protection of the pension protection fund. The guarantee is a promise given by a public authority to underpin the liabilities of a pension scheme should the scheme wind up in deficit. The precise nature of the guarantee and what it protects varies, but the result is broadly the same. Ultimately, those schemes' liabilities are underpinned by taxpayers.

In some cases, the guarantee covers only part of a scheme, certain members or certain benefits in partially guaranteed schemes. In those cases, schemes have to pay an administration levy only in respect of the part of the scheme that is not covered by the guarantee. Such guarantees apply typically to quasi-public bodies or legacy arrangements following the privatisation of former state bodies. In many circumstances, such pension

scheme guarantees do not present a problem because the sponsoring employers are not commercial entities operating in a competitive market.

This is the essential reason for the regulation. Members may be aware that, in 2009, the European Commission reported on an investigation into whether the guarantee for certain liabilities of the British Telecommunications pension scheme gave rise to incompatible state aid, as defined in the treaty establishing the European Community. The Commission decided that the non-payment of pension protection fund levies by the British Telecommunications pension scheme could not be justified under European Union rules, because it relieved British Telecommunications of charges that its competitors have to pay and was, therefore, incompatible state aid.

The regulations amend existing legislation to ensure that, when a scheme with either a full or partial guarantee does not pay the full administration levy in circumstances in which that would constitute incompatible state aid, the scheme is liable to pay the full levy. Regulations are already in place to implement the Commission's decision in so far as it relates to a similar exemption for the pension protection levy. The protector set of regulations, therefore, completes the action and removes the exemption from the administration levy where it gives rise to incompatible state aid.

The Commission's decision applies only to the British Telecommunications pension scheme. However, the Commission expects the same reasoning to be applied to schemes in comparable legal situations and when the facts are the same.

The technical amendments made by these regulations aim to ensure that the administration levy provisions comply with the EU rules.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Ní Chuilín): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Social Development considered the Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 on 15 April and 9 September 2010. As the Minister indicated, the rule has been brought forward in response to a European Commission decision on what was termed illegal state aid for occupational pension

schemes. As we just heard, the rule will require occupational pension schemes with what is known as Crown immunity to be treated like other occupational pension schemes and will require such schemes to pay a levy to the pension protection fund. The Committee values the important role of the pension protection fund and the security that it provides for occupational pension scheme savers. As it was felt that the rule is largely technical, the Committee was happy to recommend that it be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mrs M Bradley: I agree with the rule.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Committee, Mr Hamilton and Ms Ní Chuilín for the positive way in which they have dealt with this technical amendment, which, nonetheless, will provide some further protection for relevant organisations. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Attwood): I beg to move

That the Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

In many ways, these are more substantial regulations. Let us cast our minds back a year and a half to the situation that arose and continues to exist at Visteon, the west Belfast employer. Questions about the Visteon pension fund continue to be examined. In a very real way, that demonstrates what the future relevance of regulations such as these may be.

In that context, the Pensions Regulator operates across Britain and Northern Ireland to protect the benefits of members of work-based pensions. That reduces the risk of situations arising that may result in calls on the pension protection fund. The Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 provides the Pensions Regulator with tools to protect scheme members' benefits and to protect the pension protection fund from abuse where, for example, employers seek to avoid their obligations to the scheme or to offload them on to the pension protection fund. Avoidance not only increases the risk to the fund but increases the burdens on responsible employers and schemes through higher pension protection levies. The anti-avoidance powers operate within a legal framework, and there are certain tests that the Pensions Regulator must satisfy to justify their use; for example, where it is reasonable to exercise its powers, as well as specific factors that it must consider relevant. Those factors are set out in the legislation.

One of the regulator's anti-avoidance powers is the ability to issue contribution notices to require a company or an individual, normally the sponsoring employer of an occupational pension scheme, to put money into the scheme. The Pensions (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 amended the contribution notice power to close the loophole that prevented the regulator from issuing a notice to any scheme other than the one relating to the one in which the avoidance occurred. That meant that, in effect, an employer could avoid a contribution notice by transferring the members to another scheme.

12.15 pm

The regulations provide the technical details to underpin the change by setting out how the Pensions Regulator must calculate the amount to be specified in a contribution notice where the transfer is to a defined contribution scheme. A defined contribution scheme is one in which the benefits payable are based on the amount of contributions made to it rather than on a member's salary and length of service. The 2005 Order already provides the means for calculating the amount where a transfer is to a defined benefit scheme. The intention of the regulations is to provide a calculation that offers equivalent protection whether the transfer is to a defined contribution scheme or to a defined benefit scheme.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Ní Chuilín): Go

raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Social Development considered the Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 at its meetings on 15 April and 9 September.

As the Assembly is aware, the Pensions Regulator is a UK-wide body that is tasked with the protection of the benefits of members of work-based pension schemes. The regulator has so-called anti-avoidance powers to help it carry out its role, including the ability to issue contribution notices, which require individuals or companies to put money into occupational pension schemes under certain conditions. Those contribution notices are a vital regulatory tool to minimise the likelihood of occupational pension scheme failure and protect against the abuse of the pension protection fund.

As the Minister said, the new regulations are designed to close a loophole whereby employers could avoid paying a contribution notice by transferring employees from one occupational pension scheme to another. The Committee has previously expressed general support for the occupational pensions regulatory regime and, therefore, welcomes the rule. Consequently, the Committee is happy to recommend that the rule be confirmed by the Assembly.

The Minister for Social Development: I

thank the Committee and its Chairperson, Mr Hamilton, and Deputy Chairperson, Ms Ní Chuilín, for the positive way in which they have dealt with the matter. As Ms Ní Chuilín has

said, contribution notices are a vital regulatory tool that compels companies to act in a more responsible way than they might otherwise do. Consequently, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

Committee Business

Justice Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice (Lord Morrow): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 11 February 2011, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill [NIA Bill 1/10].

The Committee Stage of the Justice Bill began on 3 November 2010. Members will be aware that it is a very large Bill with 108 clauses and seven schedules. It makes provision in a wide range of justice areas and aims to provide better services for victims and witnesses; improve public safety and build stronger and safer communities; and improve access to justice through system efficiency and effectiveness.

Mindful that the Justice Bill was introduced relatively late in this mandate, reducing the time available if it is to complete its passage before the Assembly is dissolved, the Committee for Justice agreed to seek written evidence at an early stage of the process to ensure that its scrutiny work could begin as soon as the Bill was referred to the Committee. The Committee wrote to a wide range of key stakeholder organisations to request their views on the Bill, and a public notice was placed in the local newspapers to provide any interested individual or organisation with the opportunity to put forward views.

The Committee agreed a four-week deadline for the receipt of written evidence and has received 66 submissions, many of which provide detailed comment on the Bill. On 18 November, the Committee began to take oral evidence from a range of key stakeholders and the Department of Justice and, to date, has heard from 10 organisations. Further evidence sessions are scheduled up to and including 16 December.

On 25 November, Committee members agreed a motion to seek an extension to the Committee Stage until 11 February 2011 to reflect the importance of what the Justice Bill sets out to achieve and the need for robust and detailed scrutiny of all that it covers. In seeking an extension of the Committee Stage, members believe that the date agreed takes account of the time needed to gather written evidence, take

oral evidence, carry out the clause-by-clause scrutiny and compile and agree the Committee report.

At Second Stage, I informed the House that the Committee for Justice supported the broad principles of the Bill. The Committee intends to undertake its scrutiny responsibility for the Bill in a diligent manner but at the same time is mindful of the need for the Bill to progress through the Assembly. The Committee will endeavour to report to the Assembly on the Bill as soon as possible within the proposed deadline. 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 11 February 2011, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill [NIA Bill 1/10].

Early Years Children's Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to three hours for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the early years (0-6) strategy consultation by the Department of Education and the comments of stakeholders; agrees that there is a clear need for a cross-departmental and holistic approach to early years provision; and calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years children's strategy and action plan that will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six.

It is to be noted that the motion has the support of all members of the Committee for Education, which we should welcome as we debate this important issue.

I wish to highlight some important deficiencies in the Department of Education's draft early years (0-6) strategy consultation that were raised directly with the Committee by key early years stakeholders. At the launch of the draft strategy in June, the Minister of Education said:

"The early years in a child's life are the most important in shaping their future, unlocking their potential, identifying issues early enough so that we can intervene and giving them the opportunity to pursue any path in life they choose. These years are also essential in developing children's social, emotional, physical and intellectual abilities."

However, shortly after the launch of the draft strategy, the Committee received a briefing from officials from the Department that raised serious concerns about the document, primarily about its failure to address fully the integration of children's care and education from pre-birth to the age of six. Those sentiments were echoed by a number of key early years stakeholders.

The Committee had waited some six years for the Department to produce the draft strategy and was so disappointed by the Department's briefing on 9 June 2010 that members concluded that the strategy as presented failed to address the key issues or

provide clear proposals for the way forward. The Committee immediately wrote to the Minister, listing nine areas of concern. That included the lack of equity of standards and variability between early years providers, and, for a five-year strategy, there needed to be more emphasis on the pedagogy to be adopted for the early years curriculum. The Committee subsequently received oral briefings from three key stakeholder organisations: the National Association of Head Teachers nursery subcommittee; Children in Northern Ireland and the Early Years Strategic Alliance; and the Early Years organisation.

The serious reservations about the draft strategy that were aired during those briefings and by others in written correspondence led the Committee to agree to host a major event in the Great Hall on 17 November 2010 to provide a platform for stakeholders' views and to hear directly responses from senior departmental officials. Some 160 stakeholder representatives attended that event. Among them were parents, teachers and representatives from statutory and non-statutory preschool providers, including interested voluntary and community and private sector organisations. A good number of them participated in a lively, open and valuable panel discussion and the audience question session on the draft strategy.

During the evening, it was proposed that the Department should extend its public consultation period on the draft strategy beyond 30 November 2010. That proposal received widespread support. Subsequently, on 19 November and, again, on 25 November 2010, I put that request formally to the Minister. To date, the Committee has received no response. Perhaps, when she responds to the motion, the Minister could clarify her position on that matter.

The Committee's difficulties with the draft strategy, which are shared by early years stakeholders, are wide-ranging. The key one that I want to raise and is, therefore, the subject of the motion is that the strategy is supposedly for nought- to six-year-olds, yet it addresses only the educational needs of children aged three years and above, with the exception of a relatively minor mention of the Sure Start programme and the pilot programme for two-year-olds. Those programmes both await evaluation at the time of publication of the draft strategy. That major concern was raised time after time throughout the event, with panellists highlighting

the underprovision for children prior to their preschool education year.

I cannot say that the Minister's officials allayed those fears on the night, as there appeared to be a clear acknowledgement that the Department of Education did not have the remit to implement a true nought-to-six strategy. Officials said that:

"the strategy focuses on the DE educational provision".

They also said that the Department is:

"not designated as the lead Department for early years"

and nor is any other Department; rather, it is a "shared responsibility". That is why the Committee's motion calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years strategy and action plan, which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from birth to age six.

The Committee asked the three key early years stakeholder organisations, which were represented on the panel at the event, to list their concerns with the DE draft strategy. Those lists were provided to all attendees and are available on the Committee's home page. I will quote from them to ensure that Members fully understand why the Committee's motion is before the House. The Early Years Strategic Alliance, which represents members from across the childcare and women's sectors, referred to the need for:

"integration of early childhood education and care which has proved in other jurisdictions to improve children's outcomes and counteracts child poverty".

It went on to say that:

"DE must pro-actively take forward their role as lead Department for Early Years".

The National Association of Head Teachers' nursery education sector committee, which represents statutory nursery schools and units, said of the draft strategy:

"The age range 0-3 is barely addressed ... This is a missed opportunity to bring real continuity of approach to children's formative years... an opportunity to bring together services for children and families".

It said that:

"NAHT consider this Strategy to be unacceptable and not in the best interests of children and families in N. Ireland."

Finally, the Early Years organisation, which represents 1,200 local early years care and education providers, referred to the need to:

"Commit to the development of an integrated strategy for all children 0-6 but clearly articulate how education and care services for children 0-3 will be enhanced and developed".

It also referred to the need to create a curriculum that links learning and care needs for children aged nought-to-three and over three years, and emphasised holistic learning. Finally, Early Years referred to maintaining an integrated focus on the nought-to-six age group as crucial, given the weight of evidence from neuroscience, economics, health and education.

12.30 pm

All of that represents clear and indisputable evidence of major concerns on the part of early years professional practitioners. The original version of the Department's draft strategy sought to create an integrated early years and childcare system, and the membership of the numerous groups that were originally consulted on the draft strategy includes health professionals who support that view. However, somehow that vision got derailed over the six years that it took to develop the draft strategy.

Another shortcoming in the draft strategy relates to its provision for special educational needs (SEN). The Department's policy proposal 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' was launched in August 2009, and the consultation on it closed at the end of January 2010, yet we still await an outcome. Perhaps the Minister could explain to the House the reason for that delay.

In its draft strategy, the Department referred to the financial benefits and the benefits to the child of early identification, yet early years stakeholders considered that the draft early years strategy failed to adequately address the needs of children with special educational needs, and particularly those in the nought-to-four age band. There is a general consensus among stakeholders that there is a reluctance to assess or statement very young children, and, as a result, the additional requirements of children with special educational needs in preschool are not met. There is also a shortage

of adequately trained staff in that area in the voluntary early years sector as a result of the curriculum advisory support service (CASS) being under no obligation to train nursery staff. There are also shortcomings in the training of statutory nursery school staff, and it is widely felt that the absence of specific training for early years staff in SEN is particularly problematic in rural areas.

Although the Department's draft strategy acknowledges that differences, including those in qualifications, funding, admissions policy and staff:child ratios, remain between the statutory and voluntary sectors in preschool education, it fails to indicate how it will reconcile those differences in the future. Those differences need to be addressed in the short term with the necessary consultation with all those who are involved.

The crucial issues in the debate are that there is no cross-departmental holistic approach to the social care and educational needs of children aged nought-to-six and that no single Minister or Department is taking the lead. Indeed, one lady at the Committee's event passionately informed us that she must work with seven different Departments to carry out her role with young children. In proposing the motion, the Committee for Education seeks a joined-up approach at Executive level, with the Department of Education taking the lead. That would give proper provision and the right start to the youngest members of our society. It would also ensure that correct and early intervention is made when problems exist and would truly allow those children to unlock their full potential.

Finally, Members should note that the motion today calls for a strategy that encompasses pre-birth provision, and I am sure that Members with a particular interest in that area will pick that up later in the debate. The evidence paper that accompanied the Department's draft strategy acknowledges that learning starts before a child is born, yet provision for that stage of development is clearly absent in the Department's draft strategy. During their presentation to the Committee's stakeholder event, representatives from the Early Years Strategic Alliance reminded us of research in the field of neuroscience that stresses the importance of the final elements of pregnancy and the first two years of life in the mental development of children.

It is clear that the responsibility for provision for pregnant mothers and newborn babies is outside the remit of the Department of Education.

However, problems can occur and develop at an early stage and may not be detected until a child enters the learning environment at the age of three or four. By that time, the problems can be very difficult to address, and, in some cases, it may be too late.

This motion is important. It is more important that we provide for our children in their crucial and critical early years in a way that integrates their social care and educational needs and gives them the best start in life. Therefore, in the light of those comments, I commend the motion to the House.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion for a number of clear and critical reasons. First, we all recognise that the first five years of a child's life are the most critical. That is the most important time for us to influence, effectively address and reverse the impact of disadvantage and poverty.

International research has shown clearly that if we had only £1 to invest, we would get the highest return by investing in the earliest years of a child's life. Therefore, if we are serious about improving life chances for the most disadvantaged children in society, and if we want to end the intergenerational nature of much poverty and disadvantage and create a fairer and more equal North, investing in early years is critical.

The second reason why Sinn Féin supports the motion is based on the issue of the attainment gap between children. It is glaringly obvious that the gap between advantaged and less advantaged children opens up very early in life. Educational underachievement, despite some beliefs, does not happen at age 11, 14 or even 16. It happens at birth or even beforehand. Therefore, addressing the levels of educational underachievement means addressing early years and ensuring that we get this policy and strategy right.

I think that we have the opportunity at this time to get the strategy right, because the consultation period highlighted some of its very positive aspects. It also highlighted concerns, which the Chairperson of the Committee referred to. It is vital that we iron all those out. We need to get the strategy right, because we obviously cannot afford to get it wrong.

The third reason why I support the motion is that I think that the broad vision as set out in the strategy is right and should be supported. I believe that that is the view of many in the sector. The strategy's strapline states that we need to enable every child to develop his or her potential by giving each one the best possible start in life. That is exactly what the focus of an early years strategy should be. With that as our starting point, we need to give that vision a clear shape and focus.

The strategy is about ensuring that, regardless of the area that a child is born in, which parent it has and its family's income, it has the same chance and opportunity as every other child to achieve his or her potential. If a child is born into an uneven playing field and faces difficulties and disadvantage, it is the job of the strategy to have in place the kind of services and support that can address that.

Fourthly, as I said from the start, this is much too important an issue to get wrong. Addressing the huge disadvantages faced by children who are less well off is what matters, and we have the opportunity to seriously address that.

I support the motion, because Sinn Féin is committed to ensuring that we get it right for all our youngest citizens. We are also committed to listening to the views in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors and to working collectively with the other Departments to move forward constructively and with the best effect. If creating the most effective strategy for early years means that we need to have extra time to focus and to get it right, it is important that we give it that time. There has been a request for an extension to the consultation period — perhaps the Minister can address that in her contribution — to ensure that everybody has their voice heard and that nobody feels that they have not been listened to throughout the consultation period.

There are many examples of good practice throughout the sector. I commend the work of the early years organisations, particularly that of Sure Start, which does an excellent job out in the communities by working with families.

We have an excellent opportunity to build and deliver for all the children and young people in our society. The motion is very important, and it is fantastic that it has cross-party support.

Mr B McCrea: This is one of the more important debates that we will have in the Chamber. I share the concern of the Chairman of the Committee that the early years strategy to date has been very disappointing. I was particularly concerned when it came out in discussion — I think that the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Storey, raised this issue — that the Department of Education considers itself to be looking at only the educational aspects of early years provision, not a holistic approach. Indeed, it is not clear who, if anybody, is the lead in this issue.

I said in the Chamber when we had debates about such matters as the 11-plus or transfer at 11 that those were the wrong debates. The real debate for our society is about what happens in the early years, in the nought-to-six area of a child's development. I was always struck by a statistic that by the age of four, a child can be up to two years behind in its educational attainment. Once children are behind in that, they never make it up.

We had a useful debate at a particularly good event in the Great Hall, because we heard a lot from the stakeholders. This is an opportunity for us to say to them, collectively or otherwise, what information we took on board and what we intend to do.

This is a particularly complex issue, which is one reason why it is good that we have so much time to discuss it. We have had a time extension for individual Members to speak. That is a good thing and something that we ought to do for more debates, because we could then have proper discussions.

I hope that the Minister uses this opportunity to announce an extension to the consultation process. There is no doubt that a fine debate has been engendered, that people are very much engaged with the process and that a lot of good ideas are coming forward. I am sure that the Minister will welcome the input from all the stakeholders. They just need a little bit of reassurance that they will be able to have their say. I am sure that that will be to the benefit of all concerned.

Although my colleagues will talk about other issues — Sir Reg Empey will talk about the downstream consequences, and John McCallister about health inequalities — I want to talk about nursery provision. I say that knowing that my colleague Roy Beggs will argue strongly for the

voluntary sector. We need to do something together and have a joined-up approach.

I hope that people will take this point in the manner in which it is intended, but the most important thing that I have learned is that nursery school is not just about playing with children. At one stage, I felt that there was almost a suggestion that those who work in nursery schools ought to pay us, because they are allowed to work with children. However, the more that you get into the issue, the more you realise that those are highly trained professionals, teachers and others, who are trained to recognise the specific needs of individual children. I was looking at nursery schools in deprived and other areas. When you see those people at work, you understand the focused attention given to children who need help in life and you realise how valuable that work is.

Mr McCallister: Does my colleague agree that nursery staff play a pivotal role in identifying problems and issues early, whether that is a disability or a developmental problem? It is absolutely vital that nursery staff are skilled, trained and updated as often as possible on developments in those issues.

Mr B McCrea: I thank my colleague for the intervention. Obviously, he has a little bit of expertise in these matters. Not only is his wife a nursery teacher, he seems to be getting in on the act himself.

However, he raises a fundamental point that I wanted to discuss, which is that in everything from behavioural problems to speech difficulties, or from people on the autistic spectrum who may be at risk to any other people with complex needs, we need people in the early stages who are trained and able to identify a problem and bring forward the appropriate support and help. That is really what early years provision is about.

When it comes to how that fits in with playgroups or other issues, the inspectorate looked at the quality of provision, and there was excellence in all sectors. However, it is really important that we make sure that our teachers are trained to the highest possible level.

12.45 pm

In Finland, which is often used as an example of good practice, it should be noted that not only are all of the teachers educated to

third-level education, there is also cheap and universal childcare provision. There is a whole issue about how we make sure that people have access, and take up that access, to the provisions put forward. No doubt, people will have mentioned the difficulties about the number of places available, and I am quite sure that Mr Beggs is going to deal with that.

I want to reassure all concerned in the Assembly that the Ulster Unionist Party is totally committed to finding a way of helping very young people. It is disappointing that there is not really a joined-up approach to that. There used to be something called the children's fund. Now, we have junior Ministers and different Departments involved, no doubt all well-intentioned, but the trouble is that the issue requires cross-cutting, universal action. We need to be working together on the process. Do I have an extra minute because of the intervention?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: It is important that we get a universal approach to the issue. One wonders where our colleagues from the Department of Justice are. People have to realise that it is not just about employment prospects or health prospects; it is also about the fact that those who we do not help early in their careers run the risk of becoming victims of crime or involved in crime. One of the most powerful interventions came from people in the women's aid sector, when they are looking at how to get quality educational provision when a woman is under threat.

In conclusion, I think there ought to be some emphasis on the physiological development of children. This is not just a nice-to-do thing: neurology does actually play its part. We need an evidence base on that.

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

Mr B McCrea: The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion wholeheartedly.

Mrs M Bradley: I support this very important motion from the Education Committee. Time and again, in the Chamber and elsewhere, we have heard the statement that early intervention is essential to ensure that children get the best possible start in life. Nobel laureate on economic sciences Dr James J Heckman tells us:

"Investments in social policies that intervene in the early years have very high rates of return while social policies that intervene at later ages in the life cycle have low economic returns. A large body of scientific evidence shows a 'persistent pattern of strong effects' derived from early interventions. Significantly, these substantial, long-term benefits are not necessarily limited to intellectual gains, but are most clearly seen by measures of 'social performance' and 'lifetime achievement'. In other words, people who participate in enriched early childhood programs are more likely to complete school and much less likely to require welfare benefits, become teen parents or participate in criminal activities. Rather, they become productive adults."

General research studies suggest that, in comparison to no experience, all forms of preschool experience have a positive impact on attainment in national assessment tests taken at age seven. In addition, preschool attendance has been found to improve school commitment, reducing the risk of disaffection and delinquency during the latter stages of schooling. However, the quality of provision appears to be a crucial determinant on the effects on educational attainment. High quality provision involves small group sizes, high adult:child ratios, a balanced curriculum and trained staff.

Given the current economic climate, investing our limited resources makes good economic sense. Investment in the care and education of young children also makes good sense in boosting educational achievement and closing the gap, especially for vulnerable children and families. We now know from neuroscience that the first 18 months in a child's development are critical. Northern Ireland has an opportunity to build a first-class education system from the bottom up. Investing well in our youngest citizens will build the wealth of the nation.

The nought-to-six strategy is led by the Department of Education but needs cross-departmental and Executive support. The strategy touches on so many of the core objectives of other Departments. It is a rural issue, an employment issue and a cohesion and sharing issue. We know, from our own Northern Ireland-grown research, that we can prevent sectarianism and racism by investing appropriately in young children and those who work with them. It is a justice issue, for appropriate, high-quality early years services prevent crime. It is a health issue, for we know from international research that we can

overcome health inequalities by investing well in young children. I could go on.

The nought-to-six provision touches on all the major issues that we, in this House, are concerned with, but we must pay equal importance to the needs of nought-to-three and three-to-six age groups. We must ensure that all Departments work in an integrated manner so that the care, education and health needs of children are met. We have the opportunity to use existing resources to ensure that the Sure Start model of service delivery is rolled out across Northern Ireland to meet the needs of children. That has already been referred to as a fine programme, and it certainly is.

We know from international research that high-quality early education can be delivered by a range of education and care partners. The Education Committee has welcomed the fact that the Department of Education (DE) has set up a regional implementation group to oversee the implementation phase of the strategy. We hope that that group will create consensus across the various sectoral interests and ensure that there is a focus on meeting holistically the needs of young children. We need to see some early successes and hope that the Department will quickly remove some of the historical anomalies.

We hope that, as the Department moves towards implementation of the strategy, we will see a detailed plan with key targets and milestones. It is critical that, given the potential of the nought-to-six strategy to deliver well for young children and their families, the Executive commit appropriate resources over the lifetime of the next Budget to ensure that the potential of the strategy is realised. I also hope that there will be an extension of the consultation on the strategy.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the motion, particularly as it is a Committee motion with cross-party consensus. This subject concerns us all, and the universal feeling, as expressed by those who have spoken, is that the strategy consultation document — while it is just a consultation — is seriously lacking, not least in defined actions, timescales and costings. We appreciate that the ability of the Department to make a clear statement on the availability of funding to implement the strategy is constrained by the current economic climate. Nevertheless, the Department should seek to cost some of the proposals.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way.

I too welcome the motion from the Education Committee. Given how vital early years provision is for our community, particularly in working-class and hard-to-reach areas, and having recently had a meeting with Shankill Sure Start, does the Member agree that a decision on a Budget as early as possible will give clarity and certainty to people working in that sector? Apart from anything else and leaving aside finance, there is a human aspect to all of this.

Mr Lunn: I obviously agree with that, and I make no further comment. Now I have lost my place.

The Department should also make it clear whether commitments such as the upskilling of the workforce can be funded out of existing budgets, if no additional funding is available and to the possible detriment of existing levels of provision. The strategy also fails to highlight the role of complementary stakeholders in the nought-to-six area. For instance, it makes no reference to the role of health visitors, whose input is so important at that stage of a child's development.

The motion highlights the need for a cross-departmental holistic approach to this provision. The strategy document, as a Department of Education initiative, is lacking in a cross-departmental sense. I hope that the Department will recognise the need, in the terms of the motion and as others have said:

"to develop a cross-departmental and holistic ... action plan which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children".

Furthermore, the document does not refer to the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy, despite the obvious need for it to align with and reflect that strategy's vision and aims. However, that is, of course, assuming that the CSI strategy can be improved to the point where it is relevant.

The Department has listened to the views of the real experts in the field: the educational practitioners who work with young children and the many and varied bodies that responded to the consultation. As others said, during an open meeting at Stormont a few weeks ago, we heard from teachers, unions and parents about their concerns and fears that the final strategy might not reflect their needs or differ much from

the consultation proposals. I would like the Department to accept that the views expressed that evening were neither criticism for criticism's sake, nor deliberately negative. I hope that the Department and the Minister will take on board and consider the constructive points that were made, and bear in mind the extent of unanimity across the sector on the way forward.

I wish to make a few more specific points. The strategy makes limited reference to the needs of and provision for children with a disability, particularly those whose needs are identified before they go to school. Those children require a multi-agency response to ensure that they reach their full potential. In addition to recognising that group, the strategy should make provision for an effective policy for early intervention and support for children with special educational needs. It is unacceptable that a child in the private or voluntary sector with special educational needs cannot access the same provision as a child in the statutory sector.

There is also insufficient reference to the needs and policy actions required to address the nought-to-three age group. It is vital that the strategy detail how education and care services for children aged nought to three can be enhanced and developed. The document makes numerous references to raising the school age to six and states, in particular, that the strategy is a good place to begin the consideration of the potential implications. However, there is insufficient information on the implications of that change. What, for example, would happen to children aged four and five? How would that change affect the shape of the preschool sector and how would it be resourced? The predefined response document that accompanied the consultation gave no opportunity to comment on that aspect of the strategy. I could make dozens of further points, but most of them are included in the responses that the Department has already received, including my party's.

Finally, I echo Basil McCrea's request: it is still not too late for an extension of the consultation period on this important matter. Mary Bradley also mentioned that, and I hope that the Minister will consider it and respond in due course. We support the motion and are glad that it is before the House today.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome and support the motion, and I concur with many of the comments made by the Members who spoke previously.

We are all aware that early years and nursery education begin long before children reach school age. Ability gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils open up early in the first few years of life. If we do not have a strategy and resources to address that, by the time our children reach primary school age, we might have already set a pattern that allows for disadvantage and poor outcomes, which we are already struggling to address. We do not have the preschool education provision that is needed in Northern Ireland. We need good and affordable childcare that has an educational outcome. Given the rise in the birth rate, there has been an unprecedented shortage of around 1,200 preschool places.

Although this is a holistic debate, I wish to take a quick look at the nursery situation, which I am sure is of concern to most Members. Earlier in the year, several parents contacted me at my constituency office because their children had been unable to secure nursery school placements in their area due to the criteria set at board level. For many families, the criteria are extremely unfair, and it has been suggested that some parents were disadvantaged or penalised because they were not on relevant benefits. In fact, some children in Carrickfergus in my constituency were refused places at preschool or nursery units that there were practically next door to their homes. Their parents were, therefore, told to contact other outlets in Carnlough and Ballycastle, which seems quite ridiculous.

1.00 pm

I understand that the Minister has released £1.3 million for voluntary and private preschool places. That is welcome news. There is no doubt that it will help to meet the shortage — perhaps totally so, in some cases — and to ensure that, where possible, every child will be placed for the forthcoming school year. However, like the National Association of Head Teachers, I am concerned that the funding does not cover the state sector as such and will not include the provision of any new places in nursery schools and units.

It is well known that we need to turn our attention to addressing the literacy and numeracy problems that exist in primary schools throughout Northern Ireland. That matter could be addressed before school, and it is an area that cannot continue to be underfunded. We

recognise that each child develops at his or her own pace. We know that good quality practitioners who are committed to early years are a vital component. We know that there is a need for a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for the child. We know the crucial role that parents play, and we should be there to give them the support that they need.

Children who attend preschool are benefitted in so many ways. The nursery experience, in particular, benefits social development in all children. Disadvantaged children gain so much more when they are in a mixture of children from different social backgrounds. Children with little or no preschool experience show poorer connectivity and social behavioural outcomes, as other Members indicated, at entry to school and at year one than those who attended preschool.

If high-quality preschool education provision has such a positive effect on children's intellectual and social development, why is every child not entitled to a funded nursery school place? I urge the Minister to provide that basic opportunity for every child. It is totally unacceptable and unfair that children do not get the same funding to help them to start their educational lives. That should form the basis of some parts of the strategy. If we do not provide funded nursery places for all children, we will probably undermine the benefits of taxpayer investments in the latter stages of the formal school system.

We appreciate the success in increasing the supply of preschool education over 11 years, and it is well noted that the uptake has increased from 44% to 90%. However, there are geographical gaps in supply and demand. Parental choice contributes to the amount of places available, and there are some nurseries to which parents simply do not wish to send their children. Indeed, parental choice has led to some popular state nurseries being oversubscribed by as many as 30 places. Therefore, why does the Minister not pour some of the money that was alluded to earlier into accommodating that sector? Those are issues that hinder our children's development, and they need to be addressed.

Every child has the right to develop through educational and social activity and to learn through play in the preschool environment so that they can progress into primary 1. I appeal to the Minister for her and her Department, and other Departments as an interdepartmental

agency, to ensure that every child is well equipped to meet the needs of primary school foundation stage and years one and two by the time that they leave preschool.

I have concerns that the view held by the Minister that a child's formal education should not begin until age six will compound the problems that we have in educational attainment. The reality is that many children will not be able to read or write when they go into P3 and that the gap between children who get parental help and support at home and those who do not will widen rather than narrow. It will also create huge difficulties for P3 teachers who have to work with classes that have children who are advanced in their reading and writing and those who are only starting to learn formally.

It has been found that there are significant differences between preschool settings and their impact on children. Statutory nursery schools and classes had the best outcomes, with good outcomes also identified for playgroups. That is not to say that other types of preschool did not produce benefits; they did, but they did not offer the same long-lasting educational assistance. Those findings were supported by the chief inspector's annual report in Northern Ireland, which found that the highest percentage of good to outstanding practice in early years provision was located in those statutory nursery schools that were inspected.

Almost all Members agree that the most important years of a child's learning experience are in the early years between nought and six. The fact that the Department has failed to produce anything is, therefore, unacceptable for all Members who have called for an emphasis on that strategy for some time.

We have the lowest school starting age in Europe. It has been suggested that many of our children are not ready to enter into the formal reception class and that it causes some children much stress. We have also been advised that, in relation to the compulsory school starting age, an earlier start at preschool has been linked to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability for children. Thus, duration of attendance at preschool — the time between entrance to preschool and the start of school — is considered to be one of the most important times in preparing a child for school.

We were to have an early years strategy from the Department, but it has not yet arrived. We were told that it would be presented through the Minister at the end of the year, but we are still waiting for it, which is disappointing, to say the least. The message is simple: the Minister cannot delay the early years strategy. An evaluation of a school curriculum that is going to settle children into school, make them more enthusiastic about the learning process and increase their social development skills is needed immediately.

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

Mr Hilditch: I urge the Minister to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years strategy and plan as soon as possible, and I look forward to her bringing the proposal before the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Gerry Adams who, I understand, will address the Assembly for the last time.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to speak in support of the motion and to thank the Education Committee for bringing it forward. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí is an Irish proverb. It means, cherish the young and they will flourish. There is a wealth of reports, studies and information to support the wisdom of that proverb and to prove conclusively the value of early years programmes for children.

As Members have said, the period in a child's life up to the age of six is crucial to his or her personal, social and educational development. Basic social skills, such as learning to co-operate or to take turns, and the development of an emotional vocabulary are also essential to children. Young children need those skills if they are to develop and to function effectively in social settings or in school. Some children have special needs, such as Asperger's Syndrome or autism. They need additional support, and the earlier that those children receive that assistance the better. It is obvious that all children will benefit from early years programmes.

I, therefore, welcome the Department's draft early years strategy. The goal of the draft strategy and the consultation must be to ensure the provision of the best possible services for children and their parents. That will not be achieved by the Department of Education in isolation. In the Shankill area of west Belfast,

for example, nursery schoolteachers have told me that more than half their pupils have special learning needs. That is totally unacceptable, and it is crucial that any strategy must bring together all those providing support for families and children. In west Belfast, integrating services for children and young people is an excellent example of that under the auspices of the task force.

Poverty issues, childcare protection and provision and health provision are matters that extend beyond the remit of the Department of Education, as is acknowledged in the motion. I am advised that 46% of the young children in the Colin area of west Belfast, for example, are not registered with a dentist. The Edenderry Nursery School on the Shankill has advocated a model for co-locating services, which I strongly support. It envisages the co-location of family support workers, speech and language therapists and health visitors with children on school sites. That is essential in tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage on children.

Some young children from disadvantaged families have very limited vocabularies. I queried that recently with nursery schoolteachers, and, to my surprise, I was told that that was because the telling of nursery rhymes and stories no longer happens in some families. I have also been told of young children who have Coca-Cola in their feeding bottles. Not only is that bad for their general health, but it causes tooth decay, which, apart from the obvious discomfort, affects their ability to speak clearly.

Some months ago, I visited some Sure Start projects. I commend the commitment of the staff and the exceptional work that they carry out on a daily basis in providing help and support for families and children, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

Many committed professionals and voluntary and community workers are active in supporting children, particularly teachers, boards of governors and school staff. I commend all of them and argue, as the motion does, for a joined-up and cohesive approach involving all those sectors and all the appropriate agencies and Departments. I also advocate the concept of special learning zones to break the cycle of educational disadvantage. I commend that to the Minister.

I know that the Minister is determined to construct the best early years strategy possible and that she is mindful of the need for a holistic

approach to achieving that. I wish her well in that work.

With your indulgence, and as this is my last speech in the Assembly in this phase of my life, I extend best wishes to my colleagues here. I thank you and your colleagues, especially the Ceann Comhairle, for the fair, balanced and inclusive way in which the business of the Assembly is conducted. My thanks also go to the staff, from cleaners to admin, ushers, caterers, security and civil servants. Tá mé fíorbhuíoch díbh. I am thankful to all of them.

The Assembly is approaching the end of its first full term, which is a remarkable achievement given the difficulties that have been overcome. The Assembly is about delivering for citizens. The island of Ireland is too small for us to be separated for ever by an artificial border. Most sensible people know that, and the Good Friday Agreement recognises it. Godspeed the day when we will be united. Today's debate is an example of the issues that must be tackled if we are to improve the living conditions of citizens, particularly our children. Good luck to all of you in that important work. I commend the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Craig.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Who is staying in Northern Ireland.

Mr Craig: Yes. It is not often that I welcome the departure of someone from the House, but I am rather glad to see the back of him.

I support the motion.

"Early years are vital years in our children's lives. They are unique in terms of children's intellectual, emotional, physical and social development and the formation of children's ability to interact successfully with the world around them, both in early childhood and in later life. They are the springboard for creating confident learners and participative citizens."

Those are not my words. They are the words of the Education Minister in the foreword to the Department of Education's early years strategy. It is good to read something with which I agree. However, the Minister has produced a strategy that is insignificant and misses many of the important points that have been raised, not only by researchers, but by stakeholders who specialise in the subject area. The early years of a child's life are vital and are reflected in

the development of a child and his or her later learning. Social interaction, communication and academic ability all boil down to what children learn in those early years.

It is vital that we get the strategy right, because children, as we are often reminded, are our future and are vital to the future of our country. We got it right when we called it the nought-to-six strategy because it has taken us six years to get to where we are now. That is the only part of the strategy with which I totally agree.

On 24 June 2010, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education wrote to the Minister of Education to highlight a number of concerns. I have highlighted and listed some of them today as they form the foundation of the debate. The absence of good evidence in the strategy, as to the benefits of early years education, has been highlighted by stakeholders. There is an assertion that the lack of school readiness is related only to income groups. That is fascinating.

Last Friday, I had the delight to be at Barbour Nursery School, which takes in one of the most deprived places in Lisburn, the Hillhall estate. Bordering it is one of the more affluent areas in Lisburn — probably in Northern Ireland, if the truth be told — so there is an interesting mix of children in that group. When I investigated how its strategy of teaching and learning improved the lives of children, it was fascinating to find out that it improved the lives of all the children, regardless of the background of their parents. That scheme has, quite frankly, picked up many early difficulties in the lives of those children, whether they come from a more affluent or a more deprived background. It is a strategy that helps those children to develop.

1.15 pm

The strategy ignores the fact that a child may not be ready for school due to, for example, the number of books at home and the access that a child has to educational resources. Again, that is not true solely of those from deprived backgrounds. I have seen examples in my constituency of people from surprisingly middle-class backgrounds having the same difficulties in their childhood. There is also an absence in the strategy of an evidence-based focus on play-based learning and development. It is also lacking in laying out the current legislative provision and an indication of any future legislative proposals. What does the Minister

intend to do to tackle that fast-evolving subject? Does she have any ideas worth discussing?

Other issues include those of the potential change to the school starting age, which has not been addressed, and the absence of any costing to implement the draft strategy. Stakeholders, many of whom work in the field, argue that the strategy is severely lacking in detail. There is also a view that the published strategy does not focus enough on the child. Stakeholders also pointed out that the strategy failed to mention the child poverty strategy that is being drawn up by OFMDFM, yet it talks about a joined-up approach.

Stakeholders have accused the Department of Education of failing to take the lead on the early years issue and of simply drawing up and publishing, for the sake of it, a strategy that is inadequate. I tend to agree with that assertion. The Minister needs to take this strategy back to the Department and to come back to the Committee when she has taken on board and acted on all these issues. A strategy is pointless without direction, support and a workable plan that has the support of all the stakeholders. The Minister talks regularly about consensus. She has certainly failed to win over the people who matter here and to reach a consensus.

Sir Reg Empey: I echo the words of my colleague from Lagan Valley Basil McCrea who said that issues such as this represent the real education debate: the one that we should have been having over past years, instead of the ideological trench warfare with which we have, unfortunately, been left.

I want to concentrate for a moment on the downstream consequences of failure during the early years. Members may not be fully aware of the costs that fall to other Departments because of failure at the nought-to-six stage. All the evidence is that, for children at that stage, and even from nought to three, their development forms the basis of their future success. That, in turn, is linked closely to their social and economic backgrounds. In my view, there is little doubt that it is infinitely more difficult and expensive to try to deliver a service to teach reading, writing, numeracy and ICT to a young adult at 16. We all understand why.

Is it not a national scandal that, after so many years at school, we are still, despite improvements in recent years, turning out thousands of young people without adequate

qualifications in those areas? I simply do not understand how and why it is that we allow our children to go from primary to post-primary schools unable to read or write. No possible successful outcome can be achieved under those circumstances.

Among the other costs, of course, is that DEL has to deal with the essential skills side of things. I know for a fact that tens of millions of pounds are spent every year engaging with organisations to try to deal with such young people. That is because, sadly, many of them fall into a category that we have debated in the House time and time again: NEETs — those not in education, employment or training.

I pay tribute to the many voluntary organisations that take on that difficult work. The subject is specialised and can be extremely difficult. There is a correlation between young people from care backgrounds and dysfunctional families and alcohol and drug abuse and all the other social ills. Those young people inevitably clash with the justice system at that stage, and there are costs to that. Any member of the Justice Committee who has visited Hydebank Wood has seen that young people are there because of mistakes that were made at the beginning of their lives. If we in the Assembly do nothing other than address those issues, we will, I hope, have at least earned our place and justified our existence.

The status quo is not working. Although there have been improvements, and many dedicated professionals are doing what they can, day and daily, the fact remains that a very large percentage of our population, particularly our young people, do not have even basic skills. How are they going to progress through employment? How will they prosper? How are they going to do anything other than remain in a permanent clash with the justice system? That represents waste, not only economic waste, but personal waste and a waste of the social interaction that they could have had. What happens when they become parents? The cycle goes on. The Assembly has to break that cycle, and we must realise that we have to move resources from the latter part of people's development to the beginning of that development. I believe that, over time, that will solve many problems.

Parents have, of course, come to the Education Committee to say that they are not content that their children are being required to attend

school at the age of four. We have heard very eloquent and passionate presentations from parents who said that their children were simply not ready at that age. They also pointed out that people forget about premature births. If we add that into the criteria for the qualifying date of birth for a child going to school, we can see that that can have a significant impact. We will have to look at that issue and at examples from elsewhere and realise that perhaps the parents know best. On the other hand, if a child comes from a dysfunctional background, perhaps schooling will give some focus and formality to that child's life. So, there is a tension between those two positions, and it is a tension that we are going to have to address. I hope that the Minister will draw attention to that in her summing up.

My colleague mentioned the position of the children's fund, which was an Executive programme fund that came about in the first Assembly. No sooner had the Assembly come down than the fund was got rid of. The then Secretary of State, Peter Hain, brought it back and then it was gone again. I know that the two junior Ministers have taken on a specific responsibility for children, and there is, of course, a cross-departmental subcommittee, but we have to admit that our position on early years and on how we deal with children has been consistently inconsistent. Some clarity and certainty has to be brought into the area.

I commend the motion to the House. I believe that the Committee has done the right thing in bringing it forward, and I hope that it will form the basis of a real debate on education and not continue the trench warfare in which we have been engaging in recent years.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion. I welcome the tone of the debate. It has been a good and instructive debate on the very important subject of early years and on how we, as an Assembly, and the Executive progress through the issue in the time ahead.

The consultation on the draft strategy that was published by the Department of Education ended at the end of November. The strategy drew many comments and, it has to be said, much criticism. No one can shy away from the fact that we have to get it right. It has taken a long time to get the strategy published, but if it takes longer to implement and requires the

Executive to collectively look at the programme of work, that is what should happen. We should ensure that we get a collective strategy that deals with children aged nought to six. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Education said, the motion alludes to the latter stages of pregnancy and the development of children in the womb.

The education of our children takes place in a number of venues, including in the formal setting of our schools, but it also takes place in our homes and communities. I am fortunate to be the father of a three-year-old and a five-year-old. We, as parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents or in any other position that requires dealing regularly with children of that age, know only too well that they have very inquisitive minds. The most regular question that I get asked about any factor of life is: why? In fact, some of the most sensible conversations that I have after leaving here at the end of the day are in the house with my three-year-old and five-year-old. I never win those arguments.

My wife and I are fortunate to be able to take the time to engage with our children. I am sure that that is the case in most homes. However, unfortunately, there are homes in which it is not happening. In such homes, people, for whatever reason, are not spending time talking and listening to their children and engaging with, and, indeed, playing with them. That is where the most important factor of education has to be. We are told that more than 70% of a young person's educational attainment, whether they are in primary school, nursery or in post-primary school, is as a result of what happens in the home and the community. Therefore, one reason why we have to have a collective strategy is to send the message out loud and clear that, although people send their children to school for formal education, parents, guardians and older siblings have a responsibility to encourage young people to become educated and to grow into the full people that they can be.

I welcome Reg Empey's comments about Hydebanks. The visit to Hydebanks has had a lasting impression on the Justice Committee members who took part. A number of Members talked about the different Departments that are involved and a number of them mentioned the Department of Justice. At Hydebanks, we were brought into a recreational room — I do not want to overemphasise the facilities — where we met five or six young people who were aged

15 or 16. Every one of them had known each other from when they were children through being in the institutions. They had gone through one institution after another. I do not accept that anybody is born bad. People are born into circumstances that are beyond their control. They are born into environments that create disadvantage in their lives that lead them to commit crimes against society. As Sir Reg said, if we do not get this right for children at an early age, we are going to continue to repeat the same mistake.

I think it is today's 'Belfast Telegraph' that has an article about the police questioning four-year-olds, six-year-olds, eight-year-olds, etc. On the radio this morning, somebody made a comment that the police should be charging the parents or guardians of those young people. If we, as elected representatives and as an institution of government, continue to fail to protect, encourage and build our young people, the people who should be charged are those in this gathering: the politicians. If we, as a Government, an Assembly and politicians, continue to fail those people, we are failing more and more generations, and Justice Committees of the future will go to meet 15-year-olds and 16-year-olds who will have been in institutions since they were children. That is why this strategy is important.

1.30 pm

Debate has been ongoing for a considerable period about whether preschool education should take place in a formal setting, such as statutory education in a nursery, and whether a child attending a community or voluntary facility is losing out. I am somewhat disappointed by the tone of that debate, particularly between the two sectors. It is a debate that is required and is necessary, but we need to draw the lines back a bit and to have each sector learn from the other. The statutory and community sectors can teach each other what the advantages are, because the tone of the debate thus far indicates that we are missing the objective.

Let us not retreat into our own corners and come out fighting over the school starting age. Let us think about what is best for the young children involved and have a mature, sensible debate around it. Let us not just say, "In my head, I have a position, and I am going to defend that position". Let us ensure that we have an informed debate, challenge each other

and come out the other side on the side of the argument that is best for the educational well-being of our children.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a governor of Glynn Primary School and as a committee member of Horizon Sure Start, which assists children in areas of need in Larne and Carrickfergus.

The early years of a child's life are extremely important for their development and future life prospects. It is vital that, between the ages of nought and six, all children are adequately equipped to develop emotionally, physically and socially to reach their full capability, whether in education or the world of work. We need to do all that we can to help our children to achieve that by helping to create confident, active and positive citizens.

That early investment, as well as being good for individuals, makes economic sense. That has been recognised internationally through the work of Professor James Heckman. Over the past year or so, Steve Aos of Washington State has been in this Building, and Dr Harry Burns, the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, who identified the importance of early years learning and early education, spoke at an Investing for Health partnership meeting that I attended.

More needs to be done to the strategy to ensure that parents, as well as children, are more significantly included in the early years programme. It is widely accepted and respected that the nought-to-six age bracket is important, but the preschool and pre-nursery years — those very early years — are vital in a child's development.

Up to four years of age, most children's time is spent with their parents and families, and, therefore, most of their learning and many of the habits that they acquire come directly from their parents. It is important that there are positive experiences and positive learning. There is a brief acknowledgement of that in the strategy, but there is also a failure to place suitable importance on that area. The emphasis seems to have been placed on the statutory settings of school and nursery.

Suitable parental support must be built in to the strategy to ensure that parents get adequate support and guidance on good parenting skills. That makes me think of my dad's family of 12 children, and my late grandfather who worked at

the local bleach green for 55 years. They were a stable family with a good work ethic, and value was placed on education. The children were encouraged to work hard and to develop through education, and I would want every child to grow up in such an environment where they can better themselves.

It is widely accepted that good parental nurturing can affect brain development: there is scientific evidence. Hardwiring occurs in the brain in those very early years, and if you wait until a child reaches preschool, it can be too late. Opportunities will have been missed. Aside from international research, we have local early years organisations such as Sure Start, Barnardo's, and Action for Children. They all recognise the significant role of the family and how the early family environment can set the foundations for a child's better life chances. Therefore, there is a need to support parents in order to improve their parenting skills in those early years.

The strategy mentions the fact that some programmes will be extended and expanded. However, it fails to acknowledge the areas in which change is needed and the fact that choices must be made. I refer in particular to a recommendation in a recent PAC report, which identified the need to address problems with some substandard reception classes. To get better outcomes, we have to make improvements on where we spend money.

I found it sad that the Minister's personal political pet issue, the Irish language, is covered more extensively in the strategy than assisting children with speech and language development issues. Recently, on a visit to a Sure Start scheme, I spoke to the parent of a child who had almost become isolated because of speech and language impediments, but who, in a relatively short time, caught up and is now back up to speed and ready for the school environment. I think also of parents who do not have good English, who may be isolated in their community and unable to access fully the Health Service in order to gain benefits for their children. Those are priority areas in which, rather than teaching the Irish language, we should be teaching English and ensuring that people have good speech and language skills. It is inappropriate, therefore, to include Irish language teaching in the debate.

Why are 7% of children not accessing preschool education? Is it because some parents choose to home educate? I suspect that, as was mentioned earlier, it is also to do with the availability of places. In addition, in some disadvantaged communities, there is an issue with why some parents and their children are not engaging with services. Therefore, further research is needed in that area to ensure that those in greatest need receive assistance.

As I am sure Members are aware, the issue of two-year-olds entering a nursery setting must be dealt with straight away. It is dreadful that someone in their immediate preschool year is not given a place, yet we are funding two-year-olds to go into a class with four-year-olds. If you had a playgroup at home, would you expect two-year-old children to play with four-year-olds? It would be ridiculous, unless the group was on such a scale that you could have specialist groups for each age range.

It is vital that we invest money wisely to ensure that everyone in their immediate preschool year gets a place. I think of a family in Carrickfergus who were not offered a place mainly because the husband was working. They lived in a former council house and were working, so they did not qualify to be prioritised because they were not on benefits. To add insult to injury, they were then rejected by another group, only to be offered a place in its private unit.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member comment on whether we should consider the introduction of universal provision and target intervention in certain other areas?

Mr Beggs: It is essential that everyone in their immediate preschool year be afforded a place and that there be no inequality. If the system cannot offer a funded preschool place, I would far rather that funding be offered to that person so that they can go to find support. Why should someone on relatively low earnings, whose child has been excluded because the state cannot find a place, have to pay for private preschool education? A huge inequality exists, and it must be addressed. There is also an issue with how the numbers are carved up.

Although the Department has an influence on nursery school places, playgroups can also provide an excellent service, and that has been recognised by the inspectorate. Indeed, there are many nursery schools that rural

communities cannot avail themselves of due to their location.

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

Mr Beggs: It is vital, therefore, that the Department recognises the role of playgroups and the quality of the service that they provide.

Mr Bell: Research points heavily towards the benefits of front-loading resources into the early years sector. That appears to be the conclusion of the knowledge base, and if we fail to plan for young people in the nought-to-six age group, it is crystal clear that we will, in effect, fail them in later life.

I have seen at first hand, over some 21 years in family and childcare social work, the need to get it right with an early intervention, from a societal and educational point of view. Let us be absolutely clear: many young people fail through no fault of their own, and many live with parents who have a chemical dependency on drugs, alcohol or prescription medication. In my experience, many men failed their young people by leaving mothers to bring up their children with limited financial or emotional support. In many cases, they left children bereft. It is a testimony to many mothers in society who brought up children on their own that they have done it so well in their circumstances.

Young people have benefited from home support and the services provided by schemes such as Sure Start and Bryson House, which have made a difference to their lives. Those of us who worked in intensive support social work teams and dealt with those children in adolescence could see the difference in their lives when services were front-loaded. Many support and education schemes that have long-lasting benefits can be put in place before a child comes to school.

Many of us are fortunate to have been brought up by very good mothers and fathers. We saw the capacity that they seemed to have, almost naturally, to provide excellent parenting. Shortly after my son was born, I was invited to a parenting class in a local Methodist church. I remember thinking that it was going to be interesting to see what that parenting class provided. I have a degree in psychology, and I could quote Piaget's somatosensory period of child development. There was almost a false arrogance on my part. I asked myself: what

could I learn from the class? When we went to the parenting class, we were told some very simple things, such as letting children see parents reading a newspaper, because when children see parents reading, they take on board that reading is important. It is important because Mum, Dad or whoever provides the care is doing it. Issues that I thought were superficial are vital to a child's normal development. We need to make such parenting classes integral, and make sure that they are provided in facilities to which the community has easy access without huge cost.

When I worked beside child and adolescent psychiatrists, I found it difficult to deal with the fact that some young people who had hit their teenage years, at 14 or 15, were addicted to mixtures of vodka and prescription medication. Their health was being torn apart because they were taking medication to improve their heart rate and to raise their blood pressure while using other medication to drive down their heart rate. I asked one of the psychiatrists about the programme that they were following. The psychiatrist explained that, using one case as an example, a person's emotional reactions and how he or she copes with certain situations are, quite literally, hard-wired into that person's system from what he or she observed during the nought-to-six period. In those formative years, children who experienced domestic violence and emotional trauma, or were abused or saw a parent being hurt or injured, missed out. Their brains have not been hard-wired into being able to cope properly emotionally with any given situation within the normal parameters. I emphasise that the difficulty is that, if they miss out on that during the nought-to-six period, it is not a repair job later on; it is about dealing with and managing the chaos. If we miss the essential hard-wiring in those early years, it cannot easily be put back in place, if at all.

1.45 pm

The issue is not solely the Department of Education's responsibility. However, the critical point is that the Department of Education must take the lead and, along with the other Departments, show a serious joined-up approach to children aged nought to six. If we get that right and provide a proper and adequate service during the early years, I doubt that the House will do anything of more value in this Assembly term. Therefore, although I pay tribute to those who have been so successful in providing

services for the nought-to-six age group so far, I conclude with a call for the Department of Education to take a more strategic leadership direction and to lead the debate and co-ordinate the services to ensure that a future generation gets a joined-up response. In many ways, getting it right now will save us many future problems.

Mr McCallister: I start by declaring an interest: my wife is an employed nursery-school teacher, and I suppose that, given that we have a seven-week-old baby, we have a great interest in the nought-to-six strategy.

I hope that the good nature of the debate does not diminish its importance or let the Minister think that we are all agree that the strategy is wonderful and does not need significant changes. Many Members have talked about the various aspects that tie into that, such as Home-Start and Sure Start, and those programmes are absolutely vital to continue the good work. My colleague Michael McGimpsey spoke last week about why he has continued to fund Home-Start. He said:

"That is why I set aside resources from my own budget to provide continuing support to over 40 former children's fund projects that were pursuing activity that contributed to improving outcomes for children and their families in line with the aims and objectives of my Department." — [Official Report, Vol 58, No 4, p237, col 1].

We must focus on the best outcomes for those children. Many Members have mentioned the importance of getting into families early and the hard-wiring of the brain at a very early age. The Committee Chairperson mentioned pre-birth provision, which is about intervening early, helping families before they hit crisis point and looking at health inequalities.

I want to focus primarily on some of the health inequalities that stem from the issues. There are some major ones. I am grateful to my colleague Michael McGimpsey for the way that he has dealt with some of those inequalities from a Public Health Agency perspective. I draw Members' attention to the fact that we can begin with early intervention. That not only improves physical health but can have a huge impact on the mental health agenda. We need not only to consider how to deal with ill health or bad mental health but how to promote flourishing mental health. Mental health problems can start at a very young age, and we can give children coping mechanisms and

coping strategies for later life. We have to get to grips with that issue. We have only to look at the appalling record on suicide and self-harm in different parts of Northern Ireland. If the strategy is done properly and is co-ordinated across government, it could make a difference to that.

There are other health inequalities and differences in parts of Northern Ireland. For example, there can be anything up to a 24-year difference in life expectancy. What are the key factors? We must look at people's socio-economic backgrounds, educational achievement, diet and exercise levels.

As others have said, all that ties in to their life experiences from a very early age. That is why it is so important to get the strategy right and why so many Committee members, including me during my time on the Committee, were so disappointed with the strategy. They felt that it had almost totally ignored the nought-to-three element and focused purely on the three-to-six age group.

Justice has been mentioned, and there is a fine line between someone becoming a victim and a perpetrator. Problems include antisocial behaviour, children running around the streets with seemingly no parental control, stemming from a very young family or no —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware of the presentation that Steve Aos gave in this Building? He said that, rather than investing millions of dollars in new prisons, Washington state decided to invest in early years and that that money appears to have been well spent.

Mr McCallister: That is a very useful intervention, and I hope that the Minister will take it on board. Having campaigned so much to get justice devolved here, let us hope that she will engage with the Department of Justice on those issues to see what improvements can be made to the strategy and how we can improve the outcomes for children in the years ahead. Justice has an important role. We can stem back to a younger age group the lessons on family and responsibility, what is seen and goes on in the home and all the aspects to do with teen pregnancies and the rise in STIs. We need to intervene much earlier, much better and much more effectively.

We need to look at some cross-departmental workings, and I agree with other Members who said that there is a need to get this right across the Departments. DARD is involved in providing some of the rural childcare, and OFMDFM is looking at the child poverty strategy and has the lead on the shared future CSI strategy, although whether we think it is any good is a debate for another day.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: My question is at the risk of the Member's making a party political speech, which he did at the weekend. It is easy for us to point the finger at everyone else and to pick out the Departments for which our parties do not have responsibility. Will he accept that the way that Health interacts with Education for practitioners on the ground is less than satisfactory? One Department tries to use one piece of the legislation to opt out from what it is required to do. We often talk in the House about joined-up government and it is really only an attempt to have a go at another party. Let us see it genuinely working on the ground. The Health Department also has to take a responsibility for that.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for that intervention. One obvious area of distinct lack of joined-up government that I was coming to in my remarks is the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch, where the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust was providing the speech and language service and the Department of Education and the Minister were seemingly powerless to tell the board to make it work. Even when other options were looked at, including letting the funding for each child follow to the I CAN centre, they seemed to fall apart for the sake of £10,000.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member agree that few things are more important than being able to communicate and that the I CAN centre is one place that helps with that? The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has an excellent role to play, and we ought to promote that work and to ensure that that is included in the submission.

Mr McCallister: I could not agree more with those two points. We need to get on board with this, co-ordinate this approach and get in early. This should be a flagship policy, and we need to look at going back to the example of the children's fund for how you get resources and make a difference to the outcome for children.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I remind Members to please make their remarks through the Chair.

Ms Purvis: I support the Committee's motion, particularly its call for a cross-departmental, holistic approach to early years. Like other Members, I looked forward to the release of the long-awaited early years strategy. I was pleased that the Department of Education allocated a decent length of time for consultation.

As others have pointed out, the importance of early care and intervention to break the cycle of educational underachievement is no more acutely felt than in Protestant working-class areas. As we know, Protestant working-class boys make up the major non-progressing group in the education sector. The impact that that has on the individual, community and society is devastating. That is why I set up a working group to look at educational underachievement among Protestant working-class boys. I encourage all those who have an interest in that area to read the consultation document and to respond in kind. We know how important early years are to tackling that.

As the Department, rightly, recognises in the consultation document, early years programming has a profound effect on children's education and development that extends well beyond their early years. That is particularly true of children from households that struggle with deprivation and poverty. Given the multitude of international research that now supports the long-term value and cost benefits of supporting children and their families from an early age, much of which appeared in the Department's evidence-based paper to support the policy document, I had hoped and expected that the strategy would contain a comprehensive and multidepartmental approach to early years.

Although I am pleased to see in the document a rhetorical commitment to improving outcomes for children by the end of foundation stage, and a commitment to providing parents with a key role in meeting those outcomes, the policy proposals that support the objective are insufficient to achieve that goal, largely because they are solely limited to the current areas of responsibility of the Department of Education. Certainly, that was probably the most disappointing aspect of the Department's recent presentation to the all-party group on children and young people.

The document defines early years as being from birth to the age of six, yet the policy initiatives offered largely cover services that a child can access at a point of contact with the Department of Education, which, as outlined earlier, is extremely rare from the ages of nought to three, with the exception of participation in Sure Start. I know first-hand of the success of Sure Start schemes. Unfortunately, however, that is not evidence-based, as the schemes have yet to be evaluated in Northern Ireland.

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

Outside of those limited initiatives, the document offers little to children aged between nought and three years, such as infant mental well-being and development or interventions for families in the home. Essentially, the draft policy is a decent foundation stage document. However, it is not an early years document.

Furthermore, it is critical that families, particularly those who are most vulnerable, are offered some form of support for early years development in the privacy of their own homes. Parents and families are their children's primary caregivers and first educators. Support is particularly critical for parents of young children. Much could be achieved through co-operation, particularly between the Department of Education and the Health Department. It is worth noting the ongoing implementation of the Family Matters strategy.

Mr B McCrea: I know that the Member has great interest in the area and has set up her own task force. Perhaps, when she mentions the Health Department, she might also suggest the involvement of the Minister of Justice because, obviously, there are long-term implications for his Department.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right. All Departments need to work together. When the education system fails and young people do not achieve, it shows up in other Departments' budget lines. It shows up in the Department of Justice, the Health Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, and right across the board.

The policy document also raises questions about the childcare and child support services that are available to children and families from birth. Certainly, the evidence-based paper made compelling arguments in favour of the integration of early years education and

development with childcare provision and policy, yet there is no meaningful discussion of that in the draft policy document.

Although I recognise that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has responsibility for the development of a childcare strategy, I am deeply concerned at the delays in that effort and the fact that there is still no one Department with responsibility for addressing what is a critical social and economic issue. Childcare can provide opportunities to prepare children for learning and support parents through their child's education and development. The case for the integration of childcare and early years education services is well made by international research and experience.

2.00 pm

The issue is also tied to the discussion that the Department of Education is having about raising the school age, which is an issue that my working group has looked at. The argument has its merits, particularly in learning outcomes for boys. However, it cannot be considered in a vacuum, and it should not be advanced without full consideration of the preschool and childcare provisions that will be available to those children before statutory education begins.

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for her extensive quoting of international research, and I support the point that she made about the Protestant working class, which we came from. Indeed, the disadvantage in Protestant working-class boys is becoming even starker.

Will the Member comment on the work undertaken by Peter Shirlow from Queen's University in advancing loyalist communities in north Down and Strangford? In that work, he highlighted the fact that one in five children educated in the maintained sector accesses university, yet only one in 10 of those educated in the controlled sector does the same.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for his intervention, and he will be aware that Dr Pete Shirlow is part of the working group that I set up. I am acutely aware of the statistics on Protestant working-class boys, their access to universities, how they leave school with few or no qualifications and the growing number who leave school barely able to read or write. The consultation on my working group's document closes on 13 December, and I would welcome the Member's comments on it.

As the issue is cross-departmental and is tied to areas including childcare provision and the age at which children begin school, I am also deeply concerned that the Department has no clear plans to consult children and young people directly on the proposals.

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

Ms Purvis: I encourage the Minister to ensure that there is full engagement with children and young people, particularly those with disabilities.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé iontach sásta go bhfuil an Tionól ag cur spéise in oideachas sna luathbhlianta. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil luathbhlianta shaol an pháiste rithábhachtach d'fhorbairt agus d'fholláine an pháiste sa todhchaí.

I welcome the interest of the Assembly in early years education. We know that the early years of a child's life are of critical importance to its future development and well-being. We also know that interventions early in life can help to reduce barriers to learning that may otherwise reduce children's long-term chances of success.

The draft early years strategy, which has attracted widespread interest and comment, aims to set out a vision and plan for the development of early years services in the context of the responsibilities of the Department of Education. It seeks to ensure better outcomes for children by setting out a framework to improve the provision and quality of services to the youngest children and their parents and families over the next five years. It is particularly important given that we are a society emerging from conflict and we want to break the intergenerational nature of disadvantage. Therefore, the draft strategy has a clear focus on learning and education from age three onwards. However, in recognition of the vital importance of the early years of a child's life in determining its future well-being, the draft strategy also seeks to make targeted provision before the preschool year a recognised area of our work. That early provision is focused on those who can benefit most from additional support. The Sure Start programme and its associated services operate in designated areas of disadvantage with the aim of providing families with the support necessary to ensure that children are well prepared for the future.

In considering the issue of early years, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are building on a platform of well-established, high-quality services or forget that my Department makes significant investment in early years provision. We know that we have quality early years services in preschool, in education and in our Sure Start programmes on which to build.

Mar shampla, tá a fhios againn go bhfuil caighdeán an-ard le fáil sna seirbhísí luathbhlianta — sa réamhscolaíocht agus sna cláir Tús Cinnte, agus is féidir linn cur leis sin. I dtaca leis an mbliain réamhscoile de, léiríonn tuairiscí ón gCigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna go bhfuil an tsármhaitheas le fáil inár gcuid seirbhísí agus go bhfuil caighdeán an tsoláthair réamhscoile ag dul chun feabhais bliain i ndiaidh bliana.

In relation to the preschool year, reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate show that we have much excellence in our services and that the quality of preschool provision is improving year on year, and I welcome that.

There is quality provision in the statutory and the private voluntary sectors. There are people who suggest that statutory nursery provision should be available for all children. There is a view that the current system offers parents greater choice and flexibility as well as a high-quality and cost-effective method of preschool provision. I agree with my colleague John O'Dowd: we need a real and less strident debate on statutory nursery provision.

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

The Minister of Education: No. The current level of funded preschool provision is a result of the implementation of the pre-school education expansion programme. Prior to the introduction of that programme in 1997, only 45% of children received a funded preschool education. That figure has risen to over 94% of children in their immediate preschool year in 2009-2010, and we should welcome that. Obviously, more needs to be done, and we will continue to do it. In 2009-2010, over 21,000 preschool places were offered through the pre-school education expansion programme in both statutory and voluntary nursery settings. In that year, DE invested over £50 million in the preschool year, which is a non-compulsory phase of education but is highly valued by parents.

Sure Start aims to work with parents and children under the age of four to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of the children, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to ensure that they are well prepared for school and later life. Services are provided through a targeted and holistic approach, which brings health, education and parenting support services together in a co-ordinated way. It is estimated that over 34,000 children have access to Sure Start provision. In the current financial year, my Department is investing over £23 million in the Sure Start programme.

Members from all parties in the House made comments, and I will comment on a couple of them. I agree with the Member who made points about Hydebank Wood. I visited Hydebank Wood on a number of occasions before I became Minister, and it was one of the first places that I visited as Minister. I was very disturbed by what I saw in Hydebank Wood and the lack of provision there, and I went public with my concerns. I also visited the juvenile justice centre in Bangor. I agree that we need to deal with early years provision in a co-ordinated manner so that we can avoid difficulties in later life.

I agree with many of the comments that Jonathan Bell made. I also agree with Gerry Adams's comments about Sure Start. I pay tribute to Gerry for the tremendous amount of work that he has done on preschool provision, particularly on the Falls Road, the Shankill Road and in other areas of disadvantage. I have visited projects on the Falls and Shankill roads. I am delighted that he chose such an important subject on which to make his last contribution in the House. I am sure that the House will join me in thanking him for the work that he has done.

I am disappointed that Roy Beggs chose this debate to suggest that children educated through the medium of Irish should not be given fair play. I hope that he did not mean that, because the rest of his contribution was very important.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister acknowledge that what I said was that the Minister seemed to give a higher priority to the Irish language by regularly mentioning the issue than to basic speech and language difficulties or the issues faced by those from other countries who do not have English as their first language? It was the priority that the Minister was giving to that issue that I thought was inappropriate.

The Minister of Education: I reiterate the point: I am disappointed that the Member should single out the Irish-medium sector. That follows a disappointing pattern in the House. We would do well to make sure that we adhere to our statutory duties to all children, including those who learn through the medium of Irish.

I want to make a few points about funding. Dawn Purvis made interesting comments about the foundation stage. I agree with her on that. We have put significant resources into the foundation stage, as well as a new, good and play-based curriculum. For example, we have allocated £22 million to support the particular requirements of the foundation stage of the curriculum. I met trade union leaders last week, and they were unanimous in their comments about how well the foundation stage has embedded.

Since becoming Minister of Education, I have introduced measures aimed at primary education, nursery schools and units. John O'Dowd made the point that 30% of learning is done in schools and 70% in the community and at home. Jonathan Bell also referred to learning in the home. We have to continue to forge those links, because 70% is significant. It is important that we continue with those programmes. We have brought in a significant number of programmes, including reading programmes for families and schools. We want to see our schools open 24/7, not closed at 3.00 pm or 4.00 pm at the end of the school day.

We have also provided classroom assistants for all year 1 and year 2 classes, with specific funding for planning, preparation and assessment times for primary-school teachers. We have primary languages and sports programmes. We have funding initiatives to assist the children of Traveller families, and a targeting on the basis of need programme in relation to the common funding formula. There is incredible need. Mention was made of that in respect of our Protestant working-class children, and I absolutely support that. Equally, we have significant numbers of Catholic working-class children — boys and girls — who need significant support. We need to target on the basis of need in respect of all our children.

As I said, we have a new curriculum. We also brought in transfer 2010. We cannot ignore the impact of the selective system on our education

system. Members rightly cited Finland and other areas that do not operate selective systems.

I was struck by some of Jonathan Bell's points about emotional health and well-being. I absolutely support everything that he said about that. I see people jibing; I do not think that we should do that. There are important issues that we need to deal with about pupils' emotional health and well-being. In fact, I agree about the nought-to-six strategy and those key years.

One programme that I am sure Members will welcome and for which we can have cross-party support is the Women's Aid programme that I have brought in. In the past, Women's Aid did very good work in primary schools, but its representatives went directly into primary schools. The programme that the Department of Education is now funding for Women's Aid uses that organisation's skills to train teachers, because they have a huge role to play.

The primary focus of the early years nought-to-six strategy is on education services, although that, of course, overlaps with the Department of Health and health and social care boards' responsibilities in the case of the youngest children and their parents in Sure Start provision. We have sought to develop a strategy that reflects the drive for cohesion in relevant policies and services affecting early years so that children and parents get the best outcomes possible. The strategy will need to take account of a wide range of policies and strategies in development and in place in the Department of Education and other Departments. The issue of childcare in particular has been raised. OFMDFM has been developing an economic and policy appraisal, and the Executive will consider in due course how that work can best be taken forward.

2.15 pm

During the consultation on the draft strategy and here in the Assembly today, concerns have been expressed that the draft strategy needs to be more broadly based and needs to provide a cross-cutting overview of the Executive's approach to early years provision. It has been suggested that it should cover the social, care and educational needs of all young children from pre-birth to age six and those of their parents and prospective parents. A strategy of that nature would be much wider than the Department of Education's responsibility and would impact on the Departments of a number of my colleagues in the Executive. I have written

to the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to request a meeting to seek their views in the first instance and to help me decide how I wish to proceed. A decision to progress the cross-departmental strategy and action plan proposed would be a matter for the Executive.

I am aware that, during the consultation, the reference in the draft strategy to the school starting age attracted a good deal of interest. It is a fact that in the North of Ireland we have the lowest school starting age in Europe. In my view, the compulsory school starting age here is too low, when compared with Scandinavian countries such as Finland. It again led the way in the latest OECD PISA survey, with a school starting age of six. Further, I believe that there is merit in considering other, less formal, more flexible approaches to the school starting age, such as that in the South of Ireland, where parents can choose to enter their children into the formal education structures at any time between the ages of four and six. I agree with Dawn Purvis's point on childcare and preschool provision. It is important to have an open and comprehensive discussion on the subject, and I welcome the fact that the strategy has prompted this important debate.

The consultation period on the draft strategy, which opened in June 2010, was scheduled to end on 30 November. I thank all the individuals, organisations and schools who have taken the time to respond or attend one of the events organised by the Department. I am also aware that several organisations convened their own events with parents and members. I thank my colleagues on the Education Committee for their keen interest in the strategy. Indeed, from as far back as when we launched the strategy, my colleague Michelle O'Neill asked me to extend the consultation and said that the Committee would be raising that. I welcome the fact that the Committee has raised it.

The consultation has raised a wide range of issues. There is clearly significant interest among parents, schools and a range of stakeholders on the best way forward for early years provision and services in the coming years. There have been suggestions that that important area needs further consideration and debate and that the consultation period on the draft early years strategy should be extended.

Ba mhaith liom a chinntiú go ndéantar breithniú iomlán ar na saincheisteanna seo, agus ba mhaith liom a chinntiú go raibh deis ag gach páirtí leasmhar cur leis an díospóireacht agus a dtuairimí a chur in iúl.

I want to ensure that there is a full and frank consideration of the issues. I want all interested parties to know that they have had the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to have their voice heard. That being the case, I can announce that I am extending the consultation period on the draft strategy to 31 January 2011 and that we will consult children as part of that. I do not wish to delay the publication and implementation of an early years strategy any longer than is necessary. However, I want to ensure that the strategy that is taken forward has widespread support and reflects the views and concerns of all interested parties and stakeholders. I can assure everyone that I will consider all views presented and that it is a real consultation.

My primary concern will be to ensure that the children at whom the strategy is targeted receive the best possible services from the Department of Education. I know that we are in negotiations on securing further resources in relation to the overall amount of money in the Budget. If we are to seriously make a difference in the early years, I ask that all parties support the education and, indeed, health budgets for early years. I thank all Members for their contributions.

Seo ár seans le seirbhísí luathbhlianta a mhúnlú do na blianta atá le teacht agus le dífeáir a dhéanamh do shaol gach páiste. Fiú amháin sa timpeallacht dheacair airgeadais seo, ní féidir linn an deis seo le creat láidir d'fhorbairt seirbhísí luathbhlianta a ligean tharainn. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Bradley to conclude and wind the debate on the motion, although I will have to interrupt him just before 2.30 pm for Question Time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr D Bradley: I am grateful for the opportunity to wind on this important debate, if Mr McCarthy gives me the opportunity to do so.

During the Minister's response, I thought she was trying to usurp my position as the person giving the winding-up speech, because she spent more time discussing the individual contributions of Members than she did responding to the points

raised by Committee members and, in particular, to those raised by the Committee Chairperson.

The Committee Chairperson outlined ways in which stakeholders thought that the strategy failed to address the integration of children's care and education from pre-birth to age six. He said that Committee members had concluded that the strategy, as presented, failed to address the key issues or provide a clear way forward. The Minister has not responded to that today, nor has she outlined a clear way forward other than making a general commitment to write to the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee outlined nine areas of concern, and the Minister has not responded to them. The Committee also said that there was a need for more emphasis on the pedagogies to be adopted for the early years curriculum. The Minister has not responded adequately to that point either.

The Committee Chairperson referred to the event that the Committee hosted on 17 November. I was lucky enough to be able to attend that event and was impressed by the large attendance and by the commitment of all stakeholders to the goal of achieving a nought-to-six years strategy that satisfied the needs of all children in that age group. As the Chairperson pointed out, the audience that night was made up of parents, teachers and representatives of statutory and non-statutory providers, including the voluntary, community and private sectors. The general view of the meeting was that the consultation period should be extended. One positive thing that has come out of today's debate has been the willingness of the Minister to extend the consultation period until the end of January. However, I warn the Minister that that does not give her carte blanche. She has already had seven years to develop the strategy, and, now that we get it, we find that it is mostly inadequate and in need of major overhaul and repair. I hope it does not take a further seven years before we have the finished article.

One major concern about the strategy is that it concentrates on years three to six and largely ignores years zero to three. In her response, the Minister has not addressed that issue, but it needs to be addressed adequately in any future version of the strategy. That point has been made time and again by many stakeholders, not only at the event but through evidence given before the Education Committee. Stakeholders expressed their concerns at that event. However,

there was a general feeling that the Minister's officials did not respond adequately to those concerns, and, unfortunately, the Minister has not responded adequately to them today either. Hopefully, between now and the date on which the consultation ends, the Minister will have time to take on board the points made during this debate and will readjust her approach accordingly.

The Chairperson of the Committee mentioned the three major issues that were raised at the consultation event. The first issue was the need for the integration of early childhood education and care, which has been proven to improve children's outcomes and counteract child poverty in other jurisdictions. The second issue was the need to address the nought-to-three age group. That has been a missed opportunity so far. We need to bring a continuity of approach to children's formative years, and this is an opportunity to bring together services for children and families. The third issue, which the Early Years organisation mentioned, was the need to commit to the development of an integrated strategy for all children aged nought to six and to clearly articulate how education and care services for children aged nought to three will be enhanced and developed. The Department of Education should really be the lead Department on that. Those are the challenges that the Minister faces at this stage.

Many Members — around 14 in all — contributed to the debate, which was certainly constructive. One of the constant themes in Members' speeches, including those of Mary Bradley and Roy Beggs, was the need for early intervention. Mr Beggs pointed out that it is better to invest well in early years education so that we do not need to invest in building prisons later on. Mention was also made of the first 18 months of a child's life and of how critical it is to positively influence a child during that period. The neurological evidence suggests that that is a period when children need positive intervention and respond to it more readily than they do when they get older.

Mrs Bradley and Mr Beggs also referred to the work of Professor Heckman and the benefits of investment in early years education and the outcomes that that delivers: better personal relationships for the people who are involved in it, who make better citizens, contribute more positively to the economy and are less likely to engage with the criminal justice system. Those

are all positive outcomes. Early years education also obviously enriches the personal life of the child who benefits from it.

My case is clear: we should ensure that the strategy that we formulate between and across Departments has the best possible effect and impact on children. The point was made that every pound invested in early years education saves £17 later on. Therefore, not only does it enrich individuals and society in the ways that I outlined, but it has a financial benefit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. You may conclude your winding-up speech after Question Time and the urgent oral questions.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed with questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I remind Members that supplementary questions must contain only one inquiry and that Ministers' answers to questions may be no longer than two minutes, unless they indicate at the start of Question Time that they will need additional time for certain questions.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Northern Ireland Block Grant

1. **Mr Burns** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the discussions they have had with the Prime Minister in relation to the Northern Ireland block grant and the outcome.
(AQO 660/11)

Enterprise Zone

11. **Ms J McCann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had about the British Government's commitment to create an enterprise zone. (AQO 670/11)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): The First Minister and I are in close contact with the coalition Government on the details of the Budget 2010 settlement and its repercussions. For that reason, and with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 11 together.

As we highlighted publicly on 20 October, our settlement through Barnett breaks the commitments made in the St Andrews Agreement and is much worse than we were led to believe. We do not believe that the settlement is on course to deliver an investment strategy of £18 billion by 2017. The First Minister and I wrote to the Prime Minister on 20 October to ask for an urgent meeting to discuss the details of the spending review, and we are hopeful that a meeting will take place very shortly. As part of that engagement process, the Assembly will be aware that we also met the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, on 20 September, and the Deputy Prime Minister on 10 October.

The coalition Government have stated publicly that they will bring forward a paper regarding tax variations on a potential enterprise zone.

Consideration of corporation tax rates forms part of our strategy to grow the private sector. The First Minister and I also met the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Mark Hoban, on 24 November, to discuss the banking crisis in the South. We were given assurances that consideration of the potential to lower the corporation tax rate here was still on the table. We pressed the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, on our continuing concerns about the result of the spending review and, in particular, the reduction in capital expenditure at a recent meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee. The Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged that the figures are in dispute and gave an undertaking that the NIO and the Treasury will re-examine them. Meanwhile, we made clear our intention to pursue the matter, if necessary through the dispute mechanism available to us under the memorandum of understanding.

Mr Burns: I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply. With regard to the problem about our block grant and the flexible approach, will the deputy First Minister tell us whether he has made any progress in respect of Northern Ireland becoming an enterprise zone?

The deputy First Minister: Members will know that there has been a lot of debate about that issue in recent months. We have been involved in intensive discussions with representatives of the British Government. We had a number of engagements with Owen Paterson, and, on a number of occasions, in public statements, Mr Paterson referred to it as an item that he was concerned to deliver. We also had a few wobbles in the process when it became clear at an early stage that there seemed to be some difference of opinion between Treasury officials and those in political leadership, namely Owen Paterson and the British Prime Minister. However, as I said, the First Minister and I recently met the Treasury Minister to discuss the banking situation in the South. We raised the issue of how far advanced they were in relation to the paper that we are expecting to receive on the enterprise zone and on the lowering of the corporation tax rate, and I have to say that we were encouraged by his comments. Therefore, it is still a work in progress. At this stage, we are still at the mercy of what comes from London,

and we await the outcome of what, hopefully, will be a positive result for us.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give assurances that equality considerations are being taken into account in the Budget to ensure that the most deprived and disadvantaged people are protected?

The deputy First Minister: The Executive are absolutely committed to tackling disadvantage in our society and to protecting the most vulnerable people. That is why we are taking the time to get the Budget right.

In the first instance, it is for the Executive to assess the impact of any proposals on equality and good relations. As designated public authorities in their own right, each Department, including our own, is required to ensure that it has due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity across all nine section 75 categories. Once allocations have been made to Departments, the responsibility for assessing the impact of any proposals on equality, good relations and sustainable development resides with those Departments.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has issued Budget 2010 guidance to Departments on the processes to be followed in assessing equality impacts where spending proposals and saving measures are concerned. In addition, DFP has asked all Departments to submit, along with the details of their spending proposals, a summary of the impact on equality, good relations, poverty, social inclusion and sustainable development. Departments have also been asked to publish a similar summary as part of their savings' delivery plans.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that the block grant and the Budget are so interlinked, will the Minister give a final date or a due date by which the Budget must be resolved and agreed so that this uncertainty does not go on and on?

The deputy First Minister: It is important to note that all the parties that are entitled to positions in government are represented on the Budget review group, and it is very important that the Budget review group continues with the work that it has been engaged in. Officials were charged with providing a number of papers on a number of matters to the Budget review group. I think that we agree that this is not only about the distribution of the funds that have

been and will be sent to us from London; it is about a Budget-plus. It is about examining what other revenue-raising streams exist that will allow us to deal with what will have a serious impact on our Budget, that is, the fact that the coalition Government in London have reneged on the commitments that were made by a previous Administration on the capital building programme, for which we have big plans over the coming years.

Over the past three years, since the establishment of the Assembly and the Executive, we have shown that we are able to spend. Last year, for instance, we were able to spend £1.7 billion on important projects such as roads, the building of new schools and hospitals and recognising the importance of social housing. In fact, the First Minister and I were involved in the opening of two roads the other day. Each of those capital projects was undertaken to meet the needs of the people whom we represent.

Essentially, we are trying to ensure that we get the Budget right. If it takes time to get it right, so be it.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that a harmonised rate of corporation tax across the island would benefit North and South?

The deputy First Minister: I absolutely agree. We all know that we have been hugely disadvantaged by the fact that the level of corporation tax in the North is far higher than that in the South. At the recent economic investment conference in the United States, it was obvious to the First Minister and I that the level of corporation tax would exercise the minds of those who would consider investing in the North. It would be a very important development for us. I absolutely agree; this really is a very small island of about six million people. It does not make sense that we should be competing against each other, and I think that it is of no benefit to either jurisdiction that we should have to. I think that potential investors look to the opportunities on the island, and I believe that we will yield greater benefits and investment opportunities, North and South, by co-operating with each other.

Racial Equality Forum

2. **Ms Lo** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the reconvened Racial Equality Forum. (AQO 661/11)

The deputy First Minister: The first meeting of the reconvened forum took place in November 2009 and included a wide range of attendees from the statutory and the voluntary and community sectors. The meeting agreed that a racial equality panel should be established to take forward the business of the wider forum, with the forum meeting once a year. Nominations for minority ethnic representatives on the panel were received, with those volunteering having to establish their accountability to other forum members. The first meeting of the panel took place on 11 November 2010.

The meeting focused on the panel's terms of reference and future work programme. It was agreed that, as a priority, the panel would consider the future role and shape of a new racial equality strategy to replace the previous 2005-2010 strategy. The second meeting of the panel is scheduled to take place on 17 February 2011. It is intended that that will be followed by a meeting of the racial equality forum to discuss and review progress to date and raise any issues that are of concern to forum members.

The forum also agreed that a thematic subgroup should be established to consider immigration issues in the local context. The subgroup, which is chaired by the Law Centre, has had three meetings to date, with the most recent on 9 September 2010. A presentation on the work of the subgroup to date was made to the panel meeting on 11 November, and a paper containing proposals for a migration impact crisis fund was presented to the panel. We look forward to considering the proposals in the paper in the near future.

Ms Lo: I thank the deputy First Minister for his comprehensive response. I am pleased with the progress with the race forum. One of the remits of the subgroup that he mentioned is the establishment of a crisis fund to help those who have no recourse to public funds. Will the Minister advise us on its progress?

The deputy First Minister: The issue has been much in the public domain recently. We all understand that having no recourse to public funds can affect a range of individuals under immigration status, including A2 to A8 nationals and those who have travelled here under the work permit or points-based system. The difficulties that are caused by having no recourse to public funds cut across different communities in which individuals working here

legally may, through no fault of their own, find themselves destitute and in need of short-term or bridging support. Trigger issues may include domestic violence, for example, where the victim depends on their partner for immigration status; injury or illness and the consequent impacts on family, particularly for those on work permits; bureaucratic loopholes and a lack of information on the part of migrants, as in the case of A8 workers; and the requirements of the workers' registration scheme.

We agree that the issue of migrant workers who fall into difficulties through no fault of theirs deserves careful consideration and swift action. The impact of such cases can be disproportionate to the numbers involved, and it seems realistic that local services should work with those in the voluntary sector to develop pragmatic and compassionate responses to those cases, as quick and early intervention could prevent the escalation of an incident or a family's difficulties. We are glad that the Racial Equality Forum has established a subgroup to look at immigration in general and at this issue in particular. I know that the Member has been very proactive, and I applaud her participation. We are very pleased that the Law Centre has agreed to chair the group.

Mr B McCrea: Will the deputy First Minister tell us how many people are on the panel and whether he considers it to be of manageable size to monitor the Department's racial equality programme effectively?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have the exact number, but I think that there were about 50 people on the forum in the first instance, although many thought that that was too big and too unwieldy. We will get that number for the Member and write to him.

Mr McDevitt: Will the deputy First Minister evidence to the House his office's commitment to that work by telling us exactly what budget has been made available for the work of the forum, the panel and the emergency fund to which Ms Lo referred?

The deputy First Minister: I think that Members know that a substantial budget has been available for this important work over the course of recent years. The budget recognises that there has been significant progress in improving relationships with historically low levels of violence and tension. We want to ensure that improved relationships in the whole community

continue and we want to address the challenges that face new and host communities. The direct expenditure on good relations and good race relations by our Department between 2006 and 2008 was in the region of £21 million. Additional funding of almost £7.5 million over the period from 2008-2011 has been provided.

Therefore, total investment will be approximately £29 million, which takes into account efficiencies over the period to meet the public service agreement target of a shared and better future for all. Key elements of the investment proposals include a significant increase over the period to promote inclusion and integration at local level.

2.45 pm

Childcare

3. **Mr Spratt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the provision of affordable childcare will be a priority in the child poverty strategy, given that the lack of affordable provision is currently a barrier to employment.

(AQO 662/11)

The deputy First Minister: A LeasCheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Mr Gerry Kelly to answer question No 3.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased that we published the child poverty strategy for public consultation today. It contains key strategic priorities, one of which is to support more parents to be in work. Those priorities will be achieved by focusing on key policy areas, including childcare.

The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, which is chaired by junior Minister Newton and me, has already identified childcare as a priority. It tasked members of the cross-departmental child poverty subgroup to undertake an exercise to consider the issues. A preliminary report was completed in June, and the ministerial subcommittee agreed that a policy and economic appraisal should be carried out on a range of strategic options.

A paper on the appraisal report has been prepared for the Executive. It outlines the key findings, and, when the Executive have had an opportunity to consider that paper, the next phase of the work to develop a childcare strategy will begin. Our intention

is that a lead Department, or Departments, for childcare would be identified and that the childcare strategy would be developed by that Department, or those Departments, in collaboration with the relevant ministerial subcommittee and the child poverty subgroup.

The appraisal report contains a timetable of actions and estimates of the financial implications of such actions, and it is expected that the report will form part of the evidence base underpinning future public consultation.

Mr Spratt: I thank the junior Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the availability of affordable childcare, particularly in deprived areas, might well help unemployed parents get back to work? Would the Department encourage such an approach?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I agree. Lack of affordable childcare is a clear barrier to employment, particularly for vulnerable groups, including lone parents and others, who are unable to go to work without childcare.

Mrs D Kelly: Of the signature projects in the child poverty strategy, are any designed to implement affordable childcare? What is the budget for those signature projects?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): Clearly, they are connected. In my opening remarks, I said that childcare was part of the anti-poverty strategy, and that is where it will sit. If we sort out the childcare issue, which we hope to do soon — and a paper is to go before the Executive — there must be a budget to make that happen.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister inform the House whether there has been any emphasis, or targets set, in respect of children in the most severe poverty, so that we have a tangible way of measuring whether progress is made?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): The Child Poverty Act 2010 imposes a statutory duty on us to prepare a matching strategy by, I think, March 2011. The strategy was to have eliminated poverty by the year 2020. We introduced a target to eliminate severe child poverty by 2012. The targets are ambitious; nevertheless, we want to achieve them. Therefore, we are moving towards those clear-set targets.

Mr Neeson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I thought that my question for oral answer — (AQO 674/11) — would have been taken along with this question,

but I am pleased to be called. To what extent will the present economic climate be considered in the development of the strategy?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): It is a very important part of it, and the Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion will consider all of that. There is no way that we can look at this without realising that we are in more difficult circumstances than a couple of years ago. Therefore, the economic climate is at the heart of anything that we do.

St Andrews Agreement: North/South Bodies

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the St Andrews Agreement review into North/South implementation bodies and areas of co-operation. (AQO 663/11)

The deputy First Minister: Consultation on all aspects of the St Andrews Agreement review is under way in both jurisdictions. That includes considering the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) where mutual benefit would be derived. It is expected that the review group will move rapidly to conclude its work when the process is completed. A report by the review group will be considered at a future NSMC meeting, and, in accordance with statutory requirements, we will provide a report to the Assembly on the outcome of the meeting and on any decisions taken on the St Andrews Agreement review.

Mr Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister for that response. Just for clarification; I assume that the current implementation bodies are part of the review, and, if so, do the terms of reference allow for the recommendation to bring some of those bodies to an end?

The deputy First Minister: I suppose that that question begs the question of whether the Member would like to see some of those bodies brought to an end. If he were to assent to that, I would find it to be a very surprising statement from the new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, given that that party was as much involved in the Good Friday negotiations as I was. As we all know, the outcome of those negotiations resulted in the establishment of important power-sharing arrangements in the North and of North/South bodies, which I believe have

worked for the mutual benefit of all the people who live on this island.

As we go forward, we need to recognise that when commitments to agreements are made, whether it is the Good Friday Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement or the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, those agreements have to be implemented. So, I am not really sure where the new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party is coming from with his supplementary question.

Mr Elliott: You are not answering the question.

The deputy First Minister: I think that I am answering the question. The answer is that all the institutions that have been established, including the North/South institutions under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, will continue for the mutual benefit of all the people who live on this island.

Mr Bell: Does the deputy First Minister agree that those bodies, which are essentially a snapshot of the late 2007-08 period, are now of limited value given the difficult circumstances that the Irish Government now find themselves in?

The deputy First Minister: No, I do not agree with that analysis. I do not think that the Member will be in the least bit surprised by that answer. Obviously, the circumstances in which the present Administration in Dublin find themselves are very difficult, and there is no doubt that the four-year plan that they announced publicly last week, I think, will impact on every aspect of life in the South of Ireland over the next four or five years. However, that is not an argument against the working of institutions that clearly bring huge benefit to all the people who live on the island.

I will pluck out an example: InterTradeIreland has been a roaring success. It has been hugely beneficial to the business communities in the North and in the South, and we have seen increased trade between North and South in recent years, which, obviously, brings new jobs for people north and south of the border.

Whenever I hear people talking about the cost of those institutions, I hear the insinuation that a case should be put forward for their abolition because those people are opposed to them in principle. That is a huge mistake, and that approach is very short-sighted. We must recognise, as Ian Paisley correctly said in the aftermath of the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting

that he and I attended, that we have to bring down all the old barriers and all the old obstacles and remove all of the old hatreds.

Mr Leonard: The Minister has rightly identified InterTradelreland as one of the valuable implementation bodies. Will he further outline the values of those bodies as he sees them?

The deputy First Minister: The North/South implementation bodies and, indeed, Tourism Ireland are taking forward mutually beneficial, practical co-operation.

As I said, InterTradelreland makes a significant contribution to trade and business development, and, indeed, through collaboration on innovation and research. Waterways Ireland plays a key role in the development of our inland waterways, including the Ulster canal, which is an issue that is close to the heart of the former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, not Sir Reg Empey but David Trimble.

The Loughs Agency's work on the protection, conservation and development of the tourism potential of the Foyle and Carlingford loughs is well recognised. The Special EU Programmes Body is managing and delivering major EU programmes, which make a real difference on the ground to many communities, including those in border areas. Although operating in difficult global conditions, Tourism Ireland continues to work hard to attract overseas visitors. The Food Safety Promotion Board, through its important work, contributes to health and well-being. The North/South Language Body continues to promote the Irish language and greater awareness of Ullans and Ulster-Scots cultural issues.

OFMDFM: Budget

5. **Mr T Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the potential impact of the Budget cuts on their Department. (AQO 664/11)

The deputy First Minister: When the Finance Minister launched the Budget 2010 process in June 2010, OFMDFM was tasked with identifying savings of £3.8 million, £6.9 million, £10.3 million and £13.8 million. That represents a baseline reduction of 5% in year one, rising to 18% by year four. Those targets were set in advance of the announcement of the spending review on 20 October 2010 and the proposed Budget settlement for the Executive. The impact of any Budget

reductions must be considered in the context of the overall budget outcome for OFMDFM, including any additional allocations secured through the Budget process. Therefore, I am not in a position to comment on the potential impact of any budget cuts for OFMDFM until a draft Budget is presented to the Executive.

Mr T Clarke: Does the deputy First Minister accept that, if a Budget is not agreed sooner rather than later, the impact would, obviously, be worse on his Department?

The deputy First Minister: I am working, as is everyone who is involved in the discussions, to agree a Budget and to do so as quickly as possible. I am not looking for failure; I am looking for success.

Sir Reg Empey: The deputy First Minister acknowledged that his departmental budget has increased by approximately 30% in the current mandate. Does he feel that there has been a similar increase in productivity and performance as a consequence?

The deputy First Minister: I think that the Member knows, probably better than most in these institutions, that the Department is involved in a huge amount of work on behalf of the Executive. In addition to its responsibilities in providing advice, guidance and support to the First Minister and me, as joint Chairpersons of the Executive, and to Ministers and Departments concerning their participation in the institutions of government, it has the following responsibilities: providing secretarial functions to the North/South Ministerial Council; supporting the development and delivery of Ministers' legislative programmes; providing the services of the Statutory Publications Office; developing, overseeing and co-ordinating the delivery of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy; developing the former strategic sites that were gifted to the Executive; setting strategic policy and direction on cross-cutting issues; equality of opportunity; human rights; good relations; tackling poverty and social exclusion; children and young people; victims and survivors; sustainable development; economic policy; civil contingencies; the sponsorship and oversight of the Commission for Victims and Survivors; the Economic Research Institute of the North; the Equality Commission; the Ilex urban regeneration company; the Community Relations Council; the Memorial Fund; the local

secretariat of the Sustainable Development Commission; the Commissioner for Children and Young People; the Strategic Investment Board; supporting Ministers, Departments and others in international relations, including representing the Executive in meetings with the Administrations of the USA and Europe; and providing administrative support to the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission. I could go on for a very long time. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, you cannot, because you have only two minutes.

Mr O'Loan: Will the deputy First Minister tell us who is now taking the lead, at ministerial level, on the creation of a Budget? Is it now the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and has the Finance Minister been sidelined?

3.00 pm

The deputy First Minister: I would like to think that we are all working in a spirit of friendship and co-operation. The work of the Budget review group has been important. That body has very seriously set about facing up to the big challenges to ensure that work on growing our economy, which we put front and centre of our Programme for Government, continues; that we protect jobs; that we protect the most disadvantaged in our society; and that we protect front line services. I am working on the basis that all Ministers involved in the Budget review group and other discussions that will take place as a result of the outworkings of that group are working in good faith as I am, and I believe that our chances of success are very good.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Bipolar Disorder

1. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the treatment and support available for people with a mild form of bipolar disorder and their families. (AQO 675/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): There is no

recognised diagnosis of mild bipolar disorder. In 2007, my Department endorsed National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) clinical guidelines on the management of bipolar disorder in adults, children and adolescents in primary and secondary care. People diagnosed with bipolar disorder may receive services in primary care or be referred to generic mental health services for appropriate treatment, which may involve medication, psychotherapy or social support to manage the symptoms of their condition. They may also require inpatient care. Other relevant agencies can also provide assistance with social security benefits, housing needs, training and employment. In addition, specialist voluntary organisations provide a range of useful advice and support services.

Mr Spratt: Does the Minister agree that treatment and support are often only made available when there has been an attempted suicide, violence or alcohol abuse? In many other cases, families are left to deal with the situation on their own. Does he find that acceptable?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Were the situation to be as Mr Spratt outlined, I would not find it acceptable; however, I do not believe that that is an accurate reflection of services on the ground. I have invested in mental health services during the comprehensive spending review period to ensure that we provide better support for those suffering mental ill health. Members are aware that, compared with England, our funding needs are around 25% greater pro rata but our funding is around 25% less pro rata. Nevertheless, we have come forward with the Bamford action plan, which has been endorsed by the entire Executive, and all Departments are working with me to address the issue.

Mr Callaghan: Is the Minister satisfied that service provision for mild bipolar sufferers is consistent across all trust areas?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Equity of treatment across Northern Ireland is an important issue, and it is something that I look to achieve. In pursuit of that, this year has seen the development of the psychological therapies strategy. We have also brought forward our personality disorder service strategy, as well as strategies around cognitive behavioural therapy. We have invested

and looked to take the steps that Bamford has outlined. If the Member has examples of inequity among the five trusts that deliver the services, I would be interested to hear them.

Public Health Agency

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the work of the Public Health Agency.
(AQO 677/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I established the Public Health Agency in April 2009 to bring together the various disparate elements of health improvement and health protection in one place and to drive forward co-ordinated action addressing health inequalities. It continues to inform and empower individuals and communities in respect of lifestyle challenges such as smoking, obesity and alcohol misuse, and it supports local initiatives in respect of suicide prevention.

Key achievements include successfully responding to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, achieving the highest H1N1 vaccination uptake rates in the UK and putting in place the bowel cancer screening programme. The agency is also taking forward a joint working programme with local government.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that health and social care must be protected in order that the emphasis on public health in communities can continue?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Of course, I very much agree. Members will be aware of my overarching strategy, because I have outlined it over the past three years: to invest, to be efficient and to engage the Northern Ireland population in respect of their health. The strategy is very much about addressing inequalities and the harmful lifestyle choices that we often make. To that end, I am working on advanced arrangements in that area with 24 local councils. Of course, to ensure that the pro rata funding gap between here and England of somewhere over £600 million does not widen but, in fact narrows, I shall look closely at the Budget settlement, which we hope to see coming forward shortly.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. I am a fan of the Public Health Agency, which does good work not just at official level but, as we have seen, on the

ground. Where will the Investing for Health strategy and the review that we are hopefully due to see sit with the strategy that the Public Health Agency is due to take forward?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The review outcomes are being considered and will come forward for the Committee and Members to consider shortly. The review is very much about the Public Health Agency being the deliverer of the strategy, and I will look to see that it does that. The Member will be aware that, prior to the establishment of the Public Health Agency, there were a number of disparate bodies. We have brought them together. The other thing that I have looked to do, because it is very important, is to work closely with local government. It would have been beneficial if the review of public administration in local government had been further advanced. Nevertheless, we have established arrangements with 24 local councils, which is a major step forward.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What proportion of the agency's budget has been spent on foreign travel?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of the percentage of the agency's budget that has been spent on foreign travel. The bulk of its spend goes on delivering services required by the people of Northern Ireland. It is a pity that the Member did not give me advance notice of his question, because I would then have been able to give him a comprehensive answer. We have had, for example, a series of fairly inaccurate newspaper stories about an abuse that, in fact, was not an abuse. I am happy to answer comprehensively each question that the Member might have.

Ms Lo: The Minister is probably aware that the voluntary and community sector runs a range of very effective prevention and early intervention projects. Will the Minister assure us that funding for those projects will not be cut disproportionately?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The voluntary and community sector plays a very important part in the delivery of the objectives of the Public Health Agency, as do other bodies such as local government. I can say that we currently fund services in approximately 600 projects across Northern Ireland, and I will look to ensure that that continues. However, I do not know how much

money will be available come 1 April. All I can talk about is the situation up to the end of March. Of course, that creates anxiety and stress in the voluntary and community sector, so the sooner that I get answers to the questions that everybody is asking, the better.

NHS: Managers

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many managers who trained and qualified as medical consultants are currently employed in the Health Service and how many earn a consultant's salary in addition to a salary paid for a managerial role.

(AQO 678/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently, 115 managers who are qualified medical consultants are employed in the Health Service. None of them receives a separate salary for his or her managerial role. As consultants, they are paid under the terms and conditions of their contract, which entitles them to receive an additional allowance based on their managerial responsibilities. Only three of the 115 consultants are employed as full-time managers; the remaining 112 are actively involved in clinical work and deal directly with patients. They spend an agreed proportion of their time on managerial duties and responsibilities.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. In view of the fact that those managers have to be paid a consultancy fee, would it not be advisable to employ others because they could be employed at a cheaper rate?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To an extent, there is logic to what the Member says. A number of managers are employed purely for a managerial role. Consultants look at issues such as clinical governance, patient safety, education and training and management of the medical workforce. It is much more appropriate that that is done by service leaders. A consultant, therefore, will be employed to perform those tasks — effectively, leading teams. I do not believe that it would be appropriate that anyone other than those consultants would be so employed.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that, if we do not meet consultants' salaries, those that

we have in Northern Ireland would leave this country, and the Health Service would be the poorer for it?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is important to make the point that salaries in the Health Service are determined, almost exclusively, by national pay deals that are negotiated in London. It is no different for consultants, doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and staff working in other areas, such as cleaners. Under those national pay deals, a consultant receives a rate for the hours worked in a week that he or she is entitled to and no more. If we tried to break that national pay deal, as has been suggested on a few occasions in the House, and short-change the consultants, we would be breaking a contract, which would not only lead to a contractual dispute but would risk our brightest and best going elsewhere. They can go to the Irish Republic and do better. We would also have to look at terms and conditions.

Ms M Anderson: Has the Minister been involved in trying to influence the negotiations or the additional allowances?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The contract negotiations are conducted nationally and periodically. I am not involved directly in any negotiations. A deal was done with the British Medical Association (BMA), as I recall, some five or six years ago. We have input through established bodies, committees and forums in London, which are attended routinely by my directors, my human resources director in particular, to discuss such issues.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister believe that those managerial salaries and, indeed, all managerial salaries across the Health Service should be subject to a pay freeze?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr O'Loan will understand that, because those salaries have been set by a national pay deal, any pay freeze would be subject to a national response. When it comes to proposals for pay freezes, we will, of course, play our part as proper members of the United Kingdom. Whatever the rest of the United Kingdom determines, that is the route that we will follow. I am not aware of any proposals for doctors, but I can tell Mr O'Loan that the increments are extremely small.

Domiciliary Care: East Belfast

5. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many older people in East Belfast have had their domiciliary care reduced in the last 12 months.
(AQO 679/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Both the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust have responsibility for parts of east Belfast.

Both trusts have indicated that no older people in east Belfast have had their domiciliary care reduced in the past 12 months as a result of budget pressures. However, there will routinely be situations in which a review of need will result in a reduced care package or in the ceasing of a short-term care package; for instance, following a period of rehabilitation or as an older person regains independence following a hospital admission or illness.

3.15 pm

Lord Browne: I am sure that the Minister is well aware that east Belfast has one of the highest proportions of older people in Northern Ireland. They are concerned that he will make serious cuts to their home care. Considering that home care does a lot to protect the dignity of older people by allowing them to remain in their own homes, will the Minister assure them that he is fully committed to making that a priority when he reviews the budget?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree very much that we should support the older population and treat them with dignity and respect. However, we need to do more than that: we need to keep them out of hospital. They do better at home than in hospitals, nursing homes or residential homes. Therefore, care packages must be in place to give them that support. I will look to do that.

I have increased the budget across the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, and my domiciliary care budget is now almost £200 million. That is a considerable increase. As the Member is aware, the demography is firmly against me at the minute because of the rise in numbers in certain parts of the population. For example, the number of people aged 85 or over in Northern Ireland is projected to increase by 67% in the next 10 years. That

sort of increase in demand will mean that the budget will be stretched and will be insufficient to properly meet needs. That will mean that we end up targeting clients with the highest levels of need. That is unfortunate and is an indictment of the House.

Mr Lyttle: What measures has the Department put in place to monitor the private provision of domiciliary care?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: If the Member means monitoring standards of the private provision of domiciliary care, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority carries out unannounced inspections of premises and facilities that provide private care. We also permit direct payments, and, in the CSR period, I allowed an extra 1,500 direct payments to individuals in the community to allow them to purchase their own domiciliary care directly. However, demand is much greater than can be met through the allocated budget. As I have said repeatedly, the pro-rata gap between us and England is over £60 million. I await the settled Budget with interest to see whether that gap closes. At that stage, I will be able to form judgements on the future of health.

Mrs M Bradley: What consultation, if any, has taken place between the Minister and all the trust areas to improve domiciliary care?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am sure you will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that in May 2008 I introduced regional access criteria for domiciliary care in an effort to get standardisation across Northern Ireland. Those access criteria play a key part in assessing need and delivery of care. The care that we provide is of a good standard. In fact, in a recent survey, 90% of respondents rated their care as either good or very good. I believe that users are best positioned to say whether the care that they get is of value.

Antrim Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency

6. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of how the Antrim Area Hospital is coping with the increased workload since the closure of the accident and emergency unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital.
(AQO 680/11)

10. **Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been treated at the accident and emergency unit at Antrim Area Hospital since the closure of the accident and emergency units at Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey hospitals and how this figure compares to the same periods in the previous two years. (AQO 684/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With the House's permission, I will take questions 6 and 10 together.

To support the transfer of services, a number of measures were implemented at Antrim Area Hospital, including the redesigning of the A&E treatment areas to streamline patient flow. That will ensure that patients can be quickly triaged. Moreover, we established a 10-bed clinical decision unit, and an additional 11 inpatient beds were identified on a temporary basis in advance of the building of a permanent extension. Antrim Area Hospital continues to respond effectively to the needs of those who attend A&E.

The proportion of people who were treated within four hours was 66.7%, which represents a significant improvement on performance prior to the service changes. I am advised that 30,844 patients have been treated at Antrim A&E department from June to October 2010. In the same period in 2008 and 2009, 26,987 and 27,610 patients respectively were treated at Antrim A&E.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister said that Antrim A&E responds effectively to the patients who present there, and he said that over 30,000 patients were treated between June and October 2010. Is he aware that 9,930 of those patients waited over four hours to be first seen at A&E, and does he think that that is acceptable? Is the Minister aware of any member of staff or management in the Northern Trust raising concerns about their capacity to be able to deal with the patients who are presenting, because of the exceptional pressure that they are under?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that only one question is to be asked. I know that buy one get one free is now very popular, but, in this House, it is one question for each person.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The consolidation of services at

Antrim A&E has led to a marked improvement in the delivery of service of A&Es, and that delivery of service will be enhanced. I am currently looking at a business case that is with me for investment at Antrim A&E, and, therefore, a business case is coming forward for the new medical ward, which will also support the A&E. Members will be aware that it is not the A&E per se that is important but what is behind the door, outside and out the back that delivers the emergency treatment, whether that is ICU, radiology, pathology, acute surgery or paediatrics. Any slowness or blockage in an A&E is generally as a result of an inability to get the patient out through the back door, and we are working on that. There is a dramatic improvement in what we had before.

Mr T Clarke: Given that we are now entering the winter, is the Minister concerned in any way about the additional pressure that has been put on the hospital after the plan to bring the other hospitals to Antrim Area Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have a number of concerns across the Health Service in Northern Ireland. In earlier answers, I illustrated some of those, including care for the elderly. I also have concerns about the delivery of A&E, not least our ability to man and provide staffing at the proper levels. The consolidation of Antrim A&E was a pressure because of our inability to man safely A&E departments at Whiteabbey and Mid-Ulster. The future is at Antrim A&E. The numbers have not increased dramatically as a result of the changes, but I need and will look for investment to go forward in Antrim A&E, and I will announce that in due course. I have huge concerns in a number of areas in the Health Service.

Mr Beggs: One method of reducing pressure on Antrim A&E is by encouraging patients to utilise minor injury units and health and care centres where appropriate, neither of which are in Larne or Carrickfergus. Is the Minister bidding for such capital funding in the Budget process?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes, I am bidding for health and care centres both in Larne and Carrickfergus. Minor injury units play an important part, and, for example, one of the key management measures that has been put in place in Antrim Area Hospital to allow it to deal with the numbers has been to triage patients coming

in to separate the flows of minor injuries from accident and emergencies. The steps that we have taken for capital at Carrickfergus and Larne would allow us to triage and to stream patients out much earlier to avoid the pressures at Antrim.

Mr Neeson: As the Minister knows, I had very good treatment at Antrim Area Hospital as a patient during the summer. Does he agree that for people who do not have their own transport, public transport facilities to and from the hospital are lacking?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not familiar with the transport facilities in that area. However, the level of public transport and the ability of people who rely on public transport to reach hospitals is a familiar refrain. The Member will be aware that that is a matter for another Minister. It is not a matter for me. I have made the point in other areas to the Minister for Regional Development, as have the trusts, about the need to ensure that there is proper public transport support for public investments, such as hospitals.

Causeway Hospital: Accident and Emergency

7. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what has been the average number of trolley waits per week in the Causeway Hospital's accident and emergency unit over the last two months and what action is being taken to address this issue.

(AQO 681/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised me that, on average, the number of delayed admissions to the Causeway Hospital — that is the number of patients who have waited for more than two hours following the decision to admit them — in the period between 1 September 2010 and 1 November 2010 was one per day. The trust monitors the number of patients who present to A&E and decisions that are made to admit, discharge or transfer them. Should demand exceed capacity, a trust escalation process is in place that is based on the regional acute services escalation plan, which was issued in January 2010.

Mr Leonard: I appreciate that the Minister has drawn a line about the decision to admit.

He may be aware that there are increasing worries in that hospital. Will he give the House an assurance that he will continue to be in contact with his Northern Trust colleagues to ensure that everybody is dealt with as quickly as possible and that maximum coverage is given to the people in the care of A&E?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am happy to give Mr Leonard that assurance. The Causeway Hospital's A&E department is an important acute service in the network. It is unimaginable that any current services at that hospital would be ceased. The Member can rest his mind on that issue. I know that there are rumours. Certainly, I am sure that the Causeway Hospital's A&E department and, indeed, its other services are crucial to the network.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that there has been criticism of the hospital, some of it justified and some entirely unjustified. All of it has been demoralising for the hospital's dedicated staff, who want to provide a first-class service. Will the Minister agree to visit the hospital at an early opportunity, to talk directly to staff and to reassure them of his full commitment to ensure that the Causeway Hospital remains a flagship hospital and that doubting Thomases will have no opportunity to talk the hospital down?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I assure the Member that a visit to the Causeway Hospital is already in my diary. I am not sure of the exact date. I already intend to get back there because, as I said to Mr Leonard, it is an important hospital in the network.

Mental Health Services

8. **Mr Bell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the potential impact on patients of transferring acute inpatient mental health care services from the Ulster Hospital to Lagan Valley Hospital.

(AQO 682/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The relocation of acute inpatient mental healthcare services from the Ulster Hospital and the Downe Hospital to the Lagan Valley Hospital will enable the South Eastern Trust to develop a centre of excellence, which will deliver the best possible psychiatric inpatient

services that can be sustained into the future. I have yet to see the proposals. I will consider carefully all of the issues that are involved.

Mr Bell: Will the Minister look at the issue for my constituents in Portaferry, who will have to travel in conditions like this for what ultimately will be several hours to visit their loved ones? Given the nature of acute psychiatric care and the need for contact with loved ones, will he factor into his decision-making their view that those services should be retained at the Ulster Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The issue of transport has been raised with me. I am aware that the trust will address that issue. I will keep it very much in mind when the proposals come to me for my opinion and decision.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware of the total opposition of people from the Ards Borough Council area and, particularly, the Ards Peninsula to the proposed move.

Is the Minister convinced that, if the move goes ahead, it will be for the right reasons, and that it is not simply intended to fill vacant wards at Lagan Valley Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr McCarthy will be aware that I follow the strategy that was laid down as a result of the Bamford proposals and that I work with an interdepartmental group to address the issue of mental ill health. The proposal by the South Eastern Trust is intended to address the need for psychiatric inpatient beds in Lisburn, and, when it comes to me, I will look at it carefully and bear in mind the views of Mr Bell, Ards Borough Council and others before making a decision. As I understand it, the proposal will provide for 67 acute beds and four psychiatric intensive care unit beds, which will be an important addition to the service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

3.30 pm

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Justice

Prisoner Release: Sean Gerard Cahill

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The next business will be an urgent oral question asked of the Minister of Justice under Standing Order 20A. The question was tabled by one of the Minister's party colleagues. Can you confirm that, under paragraph 1 of Standing Order 20A, a question for oral answer can be asked only on a sitting day? Like my colleagues in the Committee for Justice, I received notice of this question on Friday, which was not a sitting day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that point of order, Mr McDevitt. As you rightly suggested, the question was tabled on Friday. However it is being asked today, which is a sitting day. That is quite in order.

Mr McDevitt: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, the House faces a novel situation given that the question has been asked by one of the Minister's party colleagues. If it is appropriate, will you and the Speaker review the appropriateness of that situation? To the minds of many colleagues, the Minister is having the question asked in that way so that he does not have to make a statement and be subject to the proper scrutiny of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, thank you for that further point of order, Mr McDevitt. It is in order for a Member from the same party as a Minister to ask such questions in the House and in other places.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of an urgent oral question under Standing Order 20A to the Minister of Justice from Dr Stephen Farry. I wish to advise the House that, generally, when dealing with urgent oral questions, only the Member who tabled the question and the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of the relevant Committee is called. However, on this occasion, the Speaker has agreed that a

representative from each party will be given the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Justice what were the circumstances surrounding the erroneous release of Sean Gerard Cahill from Maghaberry prison.

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): I am grateful to my colleague for asking the question so that this matter could come to the Floor of the House. I am also grateful that the Speaker has agreed that a supplementary question should, unusually, be taken from each party to ensure that this is not a cover-up.

I regret to advise the House of the erroneous release of Mr Sean Gerard Cahill from Laganside Court on 24 November, and I share Members' concern that a further erroneous release has occurred. An urgent inquiry is under way to establish the cause of the release and to ensure that measures are put in place to prevent a recurrence of this type of incident.

Mr Cahill appeared in court on 24 November on a charge of aggravated vehicle taking and was sentenced to one month's imprisonment. However, subsequent sentence calculation confirmed that his sentence for that offence had been served while he was on remand. He was erroneously released from custody because subsequent checks carried out while Mr Cahill was detained in the court's custody area failed to show that he should have been returned to custody to appear before Lisburn Magistrate's Court via video link on 30 November 2010 on separate charges of robbery, possession of an offensive weapon and taking a vehicle without the owner's consent.

The error was discovered on 30 November when the Courts and Tribunals Service contacted Maghaberry prison to query why Mr Cahill had not been produced as directed. I was informed of the error by the Prison Service on the afternoon of 30 November and made a public statement later that day as soon as details were confirmed. I immediately demanded that a disciplinary investigation be launched. That investigation is under way and is focusing on establishing whether the incident was a result of human error, a systems error or a combination of both.

An initial interrogation of the IT systems has established an audit trail of some of the events leading up to the erroneous release, which

indicates a number of difficulties in relation to cases against Mr Cahill. Sean Gerard Cahill was committed to Maghaberry prison on 1 November 2010. At that point, two remand warrants were lodged. One, which for ease of reference I will call case A, was for him to appear at Laganside Court on 24 November on a charge of aggravated vehicle taking. The other, which for ease of reference I will call case B, was for him to appear by video link before Lisburn Magistrate's Court on 8 November on charges of robbery, possession of an offensive weapon and taking a vehicle without the owner's consent.

The details of case A were confirmed by Maghaberry office staff on the Courts and Tribunals Service information system — ICOS — because error messages had been generated and the case details had not fully loaded. The situation was resolved by technical support staff for case A, but the charge in case B was incorrectly on PRISM — the Prison Service computer system — as a charge sheet production matter, with no associated error message. It remained as such throughout and was not fully updated to take account of video link appearances on 8 November or 16 November.

A charge sheet production matter does not of itself provide any authority to hold an individual in custody. That error has been traced back to 9 February. At that point, the cases listed against a different prisoner wrongly included the record number for case B. The investigation of those issues, as well of other technical errors that may have led to the failure of the charges to load properly on 1 November, is ongoing.

It would not be helpful at this stage to speculate in any further detail on what may have happened. However, early indications are that the circumstances of this case differ significantly from those of prisoners Paliutis and Cummins, who were also erroneously released recently. It also appears that this case almost certainly involves a degree of systems error.

Additional measures have been put in place with immediate effect to further protect against a recurrence of this type of incident, including arrangements to ensure that three levels of pre-discharge checks — the hard copy file, the PRISM live screen and the ICOS system — take place before any prisoner is discharged from prison or from court. In addition, both the Courts and Tribunals Service and the Prison Service

are taking forward checks to provide assurances that no other prisoners have been discharged in circumstances similar to those of Mr Cahill. A dedicated team has been established in the Prison Service to take forward some of that work.

The Police Service continues in its efforts to return prisoner Cahill to custody — I spoke to the district commander earlier today — and the victims of his alleged offences have been informed.

Dr Farry: The Minister takes his accountability duties to the House extremely seriously. I am happy to guarantee the House the opportunity to discuss the matter.

There clearly are different circumstances in this case compared to the previous two erroneous releases, and there is a distinction between operational and strategic matters. How does the Minister feel that this case will inform the review of the Prison Service? Will he also reflect on how important it is to take forward the review, in light not only of this case but of similar cases?

The Minister of Justice: I thank my colleague for his reference to accountability. It is a matter that I take seriously. I resent the barracking that there has been in the Chamber suggesting that we have been seeking to cover up an incident. I placed information about the incident in the public domain within a couple of hours of hearing about it, and I have come to the House on the first available sitting day to talk about it.

There is no doubt that the case appears to have been caused by a systems error, but that does not necessarily indicate a systemic failure of the system. Nonetheless, the House will be aware of a number of ongoing incidents. This case; the previous two erroneous releases; the reported breach of the outer perimeter security by a journalist at Maghaberry prison on Friday evening; the many reports that are outstanding on the operation of the Prison Service; forthcoming reports from the Prisoner Ombudsman on a death in custody; and a report from the chief inspector on Prison Service governance are all issues that give rise to concern and point to the need for fundamental reform of the Prison Service. That is why I set up the Owers review at an early stage and why I am supporting the strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme being run by the Prison Service. It seems clear to me that the Prison Service is an organisation whose

previous functioning was defined by the issues of the day, of the day of, perhaps, 20 years ago.

Society has changed, the demands on the justice system have changed, and so the demands on the Prison Service have needed to change. Although I have seen many good examples of work being done in all three establishments when I visited them, it is also clear that the service as a whole has not kept up with the pace of change in society. That is a challenge for me as a Minister. However, that is not an issue just for me or the Department. There is a fundamental need to recognise the significant scale of the challenge to all of us in this House. If I am to make the necessary changes in the Prison Service, I will need the support of the Justice Committee in particular and the Assembly as a whole. I trust that that support will be forthcoming.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice

(Lord Morrow): The Minister said in reply to his party colleague that he takes this matter seriously — obviously not seriously enough to come to this House with an open and frank statement, which is very regrettable and is causing consternation, to say the least.

We have to tell the Minister that we have been here before, and, with the attitude that seems to prevail, I suspect that we will be here again. It was not long ago that you had to come to this House to answer questions following the erroneous release of two other prisoners. On that occasion, you said:

“...it is vital that lessons are learned to identify where there are procedural weaknesses so that the margin for human error can be removed.”

You went on to say:

“I conclude by assuring the House that I take such issues extremely seriously.”

But not seriously enough, in my opinion, to come to the House with a statement. You also said:

“I will be following the progress of the inquiry closely and will ensure that the House is advised of the lessons learned and of changes made to prevent any future occurrence.” — [Official Report, Vol 56, No 1, p37, col 1].

Well, it has happened again, Minister. The report of the inquiry into the two other mistakes was published on 12 November, and you advised the Committee for Justice that the final

recommendations include other measures, which I and the general —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Would Lord Morrow please refer all remarks through the Chair and not directly to the Minister of Justice?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice: I thought that I was doing that, but I apologise. I thought that I did intimate to you, but obviously I had not.

So, Minister, what happened? Were the recommendations in the report not implemented in time to prevent this latest mistake? Will the Minister give an assurance today that in fact he is taking all steps, not just some steps, as he seems to be doing, but all steps necessary to ensure that this matter is taken seriously and that he will not be continually embarrassed? Does he have any idea of the impact on those out fighting crime when they see prisoners being erroneously released and three of them walking away in as many months?

The Minister of Justice: I will deal with the first point. I am not sure whether it is being suggested by the Chairperson of my Committee that it is the duty of a Minister to make a formal statement to the House on an operational failure. It seems to me that that is a rather dubious way of applying logic, and I await the signs of other Ministers, perhaps from his party as well, dealing with operational failures by agencies that report to them by way of a full formal statement to the House.

I believed that the fact that we had a question for urgent oral answer tabled today dealt with the issue in a way that got the matter to the Floor of the House without suggesting that an operational issue, as opposed to a policy issue, was a matter for a formal statement. However, we will have to decide whether that is an appropriate way to proceed. I believed that that was an appropriate way, and that is why, as I said at the beginning, I am grateful that the Speaker agreed to allow a question from every party.

Lord Morrow asked for a number of assurances, some of which simply cannot be given. I cannot guarantee that there will not be future failings. I thought that I had outlined in the answer to my colleague's supplementary question the work that is being done recognising the serious nature of the work that needs to be done in the Prison Service.

I can certainly give an assurance that the steps that were taken after the release of prisoners Paliutis and Cummins would have dealt with the issues in this case. In this case, there appears to have been a failure in the computer system that went beyond the problems that were addressed as a result of those releases. That is why there have been further checks, and we now have a triple check before an individual is released from custody. I certainly have an idea of the impact that that has outside, because I have every idea of the impact that such errors have in the Prison Service and in the Department of Justice. The House can rest assured that those matters are being dealt with at the highest level.

3.45 pm

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not want to get involved in the argument about whether it is appropriate for the Minister to come to the House in respect of a matter that he describes as an operational failure. However, it is a matter of considerable public concern, and, under those circumstances, it would be appropriate for the Minister to come to the House uninvited, so to speak.

Although the Minister seems to indicate that there are various reasons for what are described as erroneous releases, the problem appears to have been more systemic than perhaps otherwise suggested. The Minister said that someone had been appointed to review how those erroneous releases happened. Will he clarify from what level in the Department that person will be appointed? Would it not be more appropriate to appoint someone from outside, given the possibility of systemic failure and the problems in the prison system? Will the Minister give us some clarity and confidence that the review is at the appropriate level, given what is obviously the systemic nature of the problems?

The Minister of Justice: I can give Mr Maskey that assurance. There are two aspects to what is being done. One relates to the potential for disciplinary action, and there is therefore a disciplinary investigation being conducted in the Prison Service at governor level. The other relates to the potential systems failures involving the computer system, and it is being conducted by a team that includes senior management in the Prison Service, managers from the court service — because of the interplay between the two services — and

outside IT consultants. They are all looking at how that issue is addressed.

Sir Reg Empey: The Minister advises that we should not rush to conclusions, yet, having listened to him, I am struck by the fact that he has already made up his mind about where some of the problem lies. Does he not consider the number of reviews and inquiries into the Prison Service to be a problem in itself, as they undermine morale and cause confusion? Does he not accept the substantial loss of confidence that those incidents have wreaked on the community in relation to the handling of prisoner releases?

The Minister of Justice: The Member seems to suggest that I have been rushing to conclusions in seeking to give the House the best possible information that I can at this stage on what may be the reasons behind the erroneous release. I thought that I had put in enough qualifications to ensure that I would not be accused of rushing to conclusions. I assure the House that there is no rushing to conclusions in how the matter is being addressed.

Sir Reg mentioned the number of reviews that are under way, and there have been a considerable number of reviews of the Prison Service in the past. That is why the Owers review is an overarching one aimed at learning the lessons from those reviews as well as looking, *prima facie*, from the position from which the review team starts off.

There is no doubt that there may be a loss of confidence; the issue is whether the loss of confidence exists because errors are not being addressed or because errors are being highlighted. It is vital that we learn the lessons from what is being done wrong, that we ensure that we address them and, as I said in my opening statement, that we bring the Prison Service to the point at which it deals with the issues of today rather than continuing to be left in the position it was forced to be in some years ago.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his replies. I agree with the Chairperson of the Justice Committee that this matter should have been brought by way of formal statement to the House instead of the Minister trying to limit a statement under the guise of an urgent oral question.

The Minister has come to what might be a premature conclusion that this was a systems

failure. If it was, it was a very serious systems failure, which suggests to me —

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

Mr A Maginness: I am coming to my question. What that suggests to me is that there could be other prisoners who have been released unbeknownst to any Member of the House. Therefore, one would want to be reassured by the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member assured me that he was coming to the question.

Mr A Maginness: I am coming to the question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is it tomorrow or today?

Mr A Maginness: Today, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister reassure the House that he will carry out a thorough investigation to determine whether or not other people have been released unbeknownst to the House?

The Minister of Justice: Mr Maginness repeated the point made by Lord Morrow about the issuing of a statement. I repeat to Mr Maginness, in case it has not been understood: I am not aware of a general rule of the House that Ministers are required to make formal statements on operational failures by agencies that report to them. By arranging to come to the House to answer a question and by requesting the Speaker specifically to allow questions from all parts of the House, I have, frankly, given a greater opportunity than many other Ministers have done in similar circumstances.

Mr Maginness eventually asked a question about whether others may or may not have been released. The answer to that is that a thoroughgoing investigation is under way that has so far identified no other erroneous releases, but that work is ongoing.

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Deputy Speaker inform the House whether there was a request this morning from the Minister for Social Development about making a statement regarding the operational failure of the computer system that manages cold weather payments? Given the very cold weather that we are experiencing, the population has expressed strong concerns.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, Dr Farry, but you have made your point. That

concludes the question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Justice.

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. With reference to your previous observations on the point of order brought by my friend the Member for South Belfast, you indicated that the Speaker had used the unusual method of allowing all parties to ask a supplementary question to this question for urgent oral answer. In those circumstances, it provided the House with a full opportunity to interrogate the Minister. However, had it not been for the good judgement of the Speaker, Members would not have had an opportunity to so interrogate the Minister. Therefore, the original point made about the way in which the question was posed remains to be answered. I ask the Deputy Speaker to look at Hansard to see if there are other matters concerned with the question that should be further examined.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Maginness, it is for the Speaker to make his own decision on the merits of the request put before him by the Minister.

Regional Development

Roads and Footpaths: Gritting

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of a question for urgent oral answer under Standing Order 20 to the Minister for Regional Development.

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he accepts that he has the lead statutory duty for the gritting of roads and footpaths in Northern Ireland and whether he believes that adequate procedures are in place to ensure that roads and pavements are kept safe in these severe weather conditions.

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The clearance of ice and snow from carriageways is carried out by Roads Service under the Roads Order 1993. With regard to footways, during the most recent review of Roads Service's winter service policy, which was introduced by Gregory Campbell in 2001 and fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways is prohibitive and the basic logistics of introducing a service that is largely a manual task makes it impractical.

The same review proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, my Department will seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils, to assist in clearing busy town centre footways and pedestrian areas. In consultation with NILGA, Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement to try to facilitate that process. A small number of councils signed up to the agreement in 2003-04 or thereafter, including Belfast City Council and Ballymena Borough Council, and there it sat.

After last year's spell of wintry weather, I asked the chief executive of Roads Service to revisit the issue. Since then, Roads Service has been negotiating with NILGA, and an amended model of agreement has been developed. The main changes to the indemnity offered to councils in the original agreement can now be extended to private sector organisations acting as a council's subcontractor or agent. Regrettably, partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways outlined in the new model agreement have not been endorsed by the majority of councils. However, Roads Service will still offer councils the opportunity to sign up to that agreement for the coming winter. I have just met a cross-party delegation from NILGA to reaffirm that offer.

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

With regard to winter service arrangements, I am content that adequate procedures are in place to ensure that roads and pavements are kept safe in these severe weather conditions. Every night from now until the middle of next April, we will have over 300 people on standby to salt main roads, thereby helping drivers to cope with wintry conditions. Salt barns are stocked to maximum capacity at the start of the winter season with around 65,000 tons of salt. Roads Service is also providing approximately 3,500 salt bins and 39,500 grit piles on public roads. More than 34,000 tons of salt have been used to date, with new stocks being brought in regularly. When ice or snow is forecast, 120 gritters can salt the main network, on which 80% of traffic travels, in just over three hours. It is a massive logistical exercise costing around £75,000 each time it takes place.

It is extremely difficult to predict what nature will throw at us. However, we must always be ready for exceptional weather conditions, such as last year's, when we experienced the worst winter in

over 40 years but operations continued around the clock on many occasions.

During periods of prolonged snow, all gritters will be fitted with snow ploughs, and Roads Service will spread salt at up to three times the normal rate. However, clearing snow is much more difficult than dealing with frost because of the large volume of frozen material. Roads Service's snow contingency plan means that efforts will be directed at clearing snow from motorways and trunk roads before other main roads and the busiest urban link roads. The operation will continue until all roads are cleared. However, that may take some time, even with all the resources deployed.

In very deep snow, Roads Service will use its 11 snow blowers, the latest of which can shift 1,600 tons of snow an hour. Arrangements are also in place to enlist the help of contractors, including farmers, to clear blocked roads. This season has already seen some extreme wintry weather, and Roads Service has already carried out more than 4,000 gritting runs to ensure that main routes remain trafficable.

Mr McDevitt: Is the Minister aware that, as we speak, the Glenshane Pass is closed, the city of Derry is deadlocked, school buses are unable to reach children to take them home, there is little movement across our region, and some elderly people have been indoors for seven days because they do not believe that it is safe to leave their home? If he believes that adequate procedures are in place to ensure that roads and pavements are kept safe in severe weather conditions, what has he got to say to the thousands of people who are now prisoners in their home because no one is willing to show the leadership necessary to knock together the heads that need knocked together and to do something to ensure that we can reasonably offer the people of this region some sort of quality of life, irrespective of the weather?

The Minister for Regional Development: I will say again that the current winter service policy was discussed, debated and agreed in 2001. I know that Mr McDevitt was not here at that time. However, his party was the lead nationalist party in the Executive then, and it no doubt had the opportunity to block or amend the proposal as it saw fit. Instead, it agreed with it.

That policy did not include the amendment that I made last year to pay particular attention to rural schools that had been forced to close

and to give the roads affected added attention from the gritters. It also did not include any proposition to deal with footways other than to engage with the local councils. That proposition withered on the vine from 2003-04 until earlier this year, when I reactivated it. As I said, I have just finished a productive discussion with the representatives of NILGA, and we intend to continue that discussion until we get some resolution about the footways.

Therefore, the proposition that was accepted by the Executive and by his party, which was the lead nationalist party in the Executive and had a veto to decide otherwise should it have chosen to do so — *[Interruption]*.

I am at a loss as to why someone who claims to have been involved in the Good Friday Agreement has to have the way that it works explained to him. In 2001, the SDLP was the majority party on the nationalist side. If today's Executive are a Sinn Féin/DUP carve up, in 2001, they were an SDLP/UUP carve up. The policy was brought forward, and it was endorsed by the Executive. It was not vetoed or amended by any party, and his party had the power at the time to do that. Therefore, we are operating on that basis.

4.00 pm

I appreciate completely — *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but there is some interruption from the people in the corner.

I appreciate completely the difficulties that people are facing. I happened to look outside before I came to the Chamber, and it was very hard to see outside because of the blizzard. I am not sure — *[Interruption.]* I am not sure why that is a source of amusement for the Member, but I am not sure what service could continue to operate in that regard. However, in very difficult conditions, and under the policy that was agreed by the Assembly, Roads Service has been going out and almost acting as an emergency service over the past 10 or 12 days, in the middle of the night, when other people are safely tucked up in their beds, in very treacherous conditions, to provide a service to the public to the best of its ability. It is to be commended for that service. It has managed, by and large, and if Mr McDevitt looks at some reports from the South, from Britain, from Scotland or from Wales, he will see that, in comparison, the services here have managed to keep traffic moving quite well.

I live in a rural area, and I know the difficulties that people in rural areas face, but Roads Service has managed to keep the traffic moving quite well. Of course, there have been difficulties for vulnerable people who are having problems leaving their homes. There have been difficulties for rural schools and for people who live in isolated rural areas. Nonetheless, that service continues to be provided, and, by and large, understanding the difficulties under which Roads Service is operating, most people accept that it is providing the best service that it possibly can.

I know that it is in his party's nature to criticise everything that happens, but, rather than criticise, perhaps it would be more appropriate for the Member to offer some support for the people who are out there, day and night, providing that service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: At this point, we would normally call the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Mr Fred Cobain, but he is not in his place. Therefore, that concludes —

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I heard what you said about calling the Chairperson, who is not here. Perhaps the opportunity would go to the Deputy Chairperson. However, it strikes me that there is a gap here. This issue concerns everyone in the Assembly. Every constituency is affected, and it is a tragedy that no provision was made for at least one Member from each party to ask questions, as happened on a previous occasion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As is customary in all these types of questions for urgent oral answer, the Speaker decides on the nature of the question and the response to it. On this occasion, the Speaker decided that the person who tabled the question and the Chairperson of the Committee would have the opportunity to speak. Other Members will have an opportunity to ask questions next week during questions to the Minister for Regional Development or they can put down questions for urgent oral answer in the future. That is the ruling of the Speaker on this occasion.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, would you be prepared to take the issue back to the Speaker, ask him to look at the situation and outline to him what has happened today, because some of us feel that we have been disadvantaged and have not been given an opportunity to speak on this important issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will, but I suggest that the Member discuss the matter with the Speaker outside of the Chamber.

The Minister for Regional Development: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I appreciate the importance of the issue that the Member opposite has raised, but, for the record, I offered to answer questions from any side of the House if people so wished, but the call was with the Speaker.

Committee Business

Early Years Children's Strategy

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the early years (0-6) strategy consultation by the Department of Education and the comments of stakeholders; agrees that there is a clear need for a cross-departmental and holistic approach to early years provision; and calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years children's strategy and action plan that will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six. — [The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey).]

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. If my memory serves me right, I was about to address the points that Michelle O'Neill and Mrs Mary Bradley made. They emphasised the role that good quality early childhood care in education plays in boosting educational achievement and in closing the gap, especially for vulnerable children. I think that it was Mr Beggs who told us that that gap can increase by as much as two years by age four. That is further evidence that there is a need for this type of strategy to be in operation from the earliest age possible.

Member after Member emphasised that the early years strategy is a cross-cutting issue and that many Departments are involved in it. However, most Members who spoke agreed that the Department of Education is the lead Department. Several Members regretted the dismantlement of the children's fund, which was a cross-cutting fund set up under a previous mandate. They also mentioned that, as a result, valuable resources were taken away from the children's sector. By implication, I think that there was a call in the debate for a reinstatement of that fund.

Members mentioned various Departments that have as their core objectives issues relating to the strategy. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, for instance, has a role to play in rural development. People in rural areas need access to high quality healthcare, childcare and early years education.

Sir Reg Empey said that the strategy is an employment issue in so far as it impacts on the

qualifications that children end up having. He mentioned the difficulties that some teenagers have with literacy and numeracy, as well as the costs of and, indeed, the difficulty involved in trying to teach those skills to teenagers around the age of 16.

Trevor Lunn mentioned that there was no reference in the strategy to the policy on cohesion, sharing and integration. He felt that that issue needs to be addressed in any future strategy.

Mary Bradley mentioned that research that is being carried out in Northern Ireland shows that it is possible to reduce or, indeed, prevent sectarianism and racism by interventions during the early years.

John O'Dowd highlighted the fact that the early years strategy is a justice issue. He referred to Hydebank, as did Sir Reg Empey, and the Minister reflected on that point. The implication was that if we have an adequate nought-to-six strategy, fewer young people might find themselves in institutions such as Hydebank. Of course, we would like to see the day when such institutions become unnecessary. If we get to the stage where we have an effective, world-class strategy, that day might come to pass.

One of the major criticisms of the strategy was that it needs to deal clearly with Northern Ireland's low school starting age. That was one of the few points that the Minister responded to. She said that she was minded to look on the issue in a positive way and that she might consider a less formal and more flexible approach to the school starting age. I am sure that that is an issue that will be of interest to many people, although I think that the Education Committee would want to learn more of the detail of that particular attitude from the Minister. Perhaps she will supply the Committee with that information in due course.

It is an issue that exercises many people. The public are slightly apprehensive about it because, in many ways, it is a misnomer: we are talking more about the delaying of the beginning of formal education. Children will still be in education, only on a far less formal footing. It would be useful to get clarity on that issue.

One of the issues that the Chairperson mentioned was the need to ensure equity among the various sectors. Issues such as funding, teacher:child ratios, the quality of

buildings, training and qualifications need to be addressed. It is possible that those issues could be addressed without much further delay. They may prove to be early successes for the Minister if she were to address them.

I think that the general consensus from the majority of Members who spoke was that all sectors, including the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector, make a very positive contribution and that it is important that sectors work together in a positive way for the good of all children. Mary Bradley made the suggestion that the regional implementation group, which was set up to oversee the implementation phase of the strategy —

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

Mr D Bradley: I understood that I had more time left, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You had seven minutes left, as I announced.

Mr D Bradley: OK. In that case, I will conclude.

I hope that the Minister, rather than waiting on a response from the junior Ministers and the Health Minister, will take the issue on board and champion it. She should take the initiative with other Departments and not be passive and wait for a response from others. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the early years (0-6) strategy consultation by the Department of Education and the comments of stakeholders; agrees that there is a clear need for a cross-departmental and holistic approach to early years provision; and calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years children's strategy and action plan that will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six.

Private Members' Business

Single Use Plastic Bags Bill: First Stage

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to introduce the Single Use Plastic Bags Bill [NIA 8/10], which is a Bill to impose a levy on suppliers of single use plastic bags; to provide for the application of levy receipts; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Adjourned at 4.13 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 December 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Mr Pat Sheehan

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Pat Sheehan has been returned as a Member for the West Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Mr Gerry Adams.

I am satisfied that the Member has signed the Roll and entered his designation. Mr Pat Sheehan has now taken his seat.

Local Government (Disqualification) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Speaker: I advise the House of a change of business. Ms Dawn Purvis is unwell and will not move the Final Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill, which will be rescheduled by the Business Committee. A valid petition of concern was received yesterday in relation to the Final Stage of the Bill.

Executive Committee Business

Commissioner for Older People Bill: Final Stage

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): I beg to move

That the Commissioner for Older People Bill [NIA 21/09] do now pass.

I am pleased to speak in the Final Stage debate of the Commissioner for Older People Bill. This is a momentous day for the Assembly, on which it takes a significant step towards meeting the needs of older people, a group that is highly valued by all Members, not least because some Members are already part of that group, and a lot more of them are heading in that direction.

Throughout this process, junior Minister Newton and I have had the opportunity to meet with many older people individually and through their organisations, and I continue to be impressed by the energy and passion that they display when they get the opportunity to have their voices heard. Older people here have made, and continue to make, significant contributions to the quality of our lives and society.

However, many older people are vulnerable members of society, and their interests and rights must be actively protected and promoted. In completing the Bill's passage through the Assembly today and, subsequently, establishing a Commissioner for Older People, we will send out a clear message that older people must not be sidelined or left in isolation and that their needs must be met when services are being delivered and policies are being developed and reviewed.

In the Programme for Government, the Executive committed to providing a strong, independent voice for older people. That commitment was made public on 18 December 2007, when

the then First Minister, Ian Paisley, and deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, announced their intention to create a Commissioner for Older People. In order to hear the views of older people, their representative groups and existing statutory bodies on how best to make that happen, we asked independent consultants to look at the case for, and the potential roles and responsibilities of, an independent Commissioner for Older People. In May 2008, the final report, which concluded that there was strong support and a need for a Commissioner for Older People, was produced. The report recommended that legislation be introduced to enable a commissioner with a range of functions, powers and duties to be appointed.

As the development of legislation is a complicated and lengthy process, the First Minister and deputy First Minister decided to appoint an Older People's Advocate in the meantime, and Dame Joan Harbison was appointed to that role on 1 December 2008. Her role is to keep Ministers informed about older people's issues and to provide Ministers with analyses based on the views of older people, and the voluntary and community sector, on the impact and practical outcomes of the policies and strategies that are aimed at older people. Her role is also to assist with the consultation on the draft legislation and on the proposals for facilitating consultation events.

Dame Joan will continue with her work until a commissioner has been appointed. I pay tribute to Dame Joan and to her team in the advocate's office. Dame Joan has worked extremely hard, and she and her small team have done an excellent job, including invaluable work on pension provision and transport, of drawing attention to the issues of concern for older people, Dame Joan regularly provided advice of the highest quality to Ministers, to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and to officials in our Department who were carrying out the consultation and developing the legislation. We are all in her debt. I do not know whether she is here yet, but, thank you, Dame Joan. I also thank the Welsh Older People's Commissioner, Ruth Marks, and her team who kindly shared their knowledge, experience and expertise.

After extensive research, the draft legislation and policy proposals were developed in 2008 and 2009. That involved pre-consultation with the Committee for the Office of First Minister

and deputy First Minister and a range of key stakeholders, including existing statutory and regulatory bodies, Departments, the Age Sector Platform and the organisations that are now known as Age NI. On 1 October 2009, we launched the public consultation on the draft Bill and policy proposals to establish a Commissioner for Older People. That consultation ran until 7 January 2010.

The events and the responses to the consultations made clear that, across the board, there was strong interest in and support for the policy and the need for a commissioner. In particular, we were pleased that a significant number of older people took the trouble, during a week of very bad weather, to come out to offer us their expertise and advice on the priorities of a commissioner. Older people attended all public consultation events in large numbers. They travelled to Stormont from all parts of the North to attend meetings of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which was considering the Bill, and they travelled again to attend all key Assembly debates. We are grateful to Age NI and to the Age Sector Platform for their assistance. I am also delighted that so many older people are here with us today, especially with the weather conditions as they are, and I look forward to meeting them shortly.

This is a good day for older people, a Cheann Comhairle, and a good day for us all. Following the consideration of the consultation responses, we made a number of changes to the draft Bill. Most significantly, strong representations were made by statutory organisations, trade unions, health professionals, age representative groups and individual older people that all nursing and residential care homes in the private and voluntary sectors should be brought within the commissioner's remit, and we changed the draft Bill to reflect that.

We also listened to the many individuals and organisations that called for the Commissioner for Older People to be able to commission conciliation and mediation services. The Bill was amended to ensure that he or she would have that new power and could, therefore, provide a cost-effective alternative to what can be a lengthy process of legal proceedings. That power can provide a speedy resolution to problems, which is often a critical factor for older people.

On 24 May, following Executive agreement, the Bill was introduced in the Assembly. On 7 June, it received wide and strong support across the Assembly at its Second Stage, and on 8 June, it commenced its Committee Stage. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister made a significant contribution to the development of the Bill, and I thank all Committee members, including those who have since moved on to other roles, for their work on the Bill. Committee members' detailed consideration of the Bill and their active engagement throughout the policy development and legislative process should be recognised. I record our thanks to them and to the Committee staff who supported them in their scrutiny.

I know that officials faced some tough questions in the evidence sessions. Committee members expressed legitimate concerns about the need to avoid any possible duplication of work by the commissioner with that of other oversight bodies. We provided the Committee with a paper highlighting issues that the commissioner could address and investigate, and the Committee was satisfied that there was a need for a commissioner and a compelling need for the investigatory powers outlined in the Bill. The Committee's consultation on the Bill produced several high-quality papers and oral presentations from consultees; I am grateful to them for their work.

Given the quality of their joint contribution to the Committee, this is an appropriate point at which to offer my thanks to Age NI and the Age Sector Platform. We are very grateful for the services that they provide to older people across the North and for the work of their policy teams throughout the Bill's progress and development. Their We Agree campaign galvanised the debate on the case for a Commissioner for Older People.

As a result of the OFMDFM Committee's scrutiny of the Bill, we proposed three amendments. In addition, we proposed three further amendments on the advice of the Attorney General on issues of legislative competence, and at Consideration Stage the Assembly voted that those amendments stand part of the Bill. My colleagues and I are grateful for the support and the robust challenge that the OFMDFM Committee, Assembly colleagues, the Executive, the age sector and many older people have given to our proposals since the initial consultation on the Bill and its subsequent progress. We feel that we now have a much improved piece of legislation.

The office of the Commissioner for Older People will be unique: no single organisation will have the range of powers and functions of the commissioner or be able to concentrate in an holistic and strategic manner on the rights and interests of older people.

I will reiterate why it is important that we establish an office of Commissioner for Older People now. The most recent figures state that 28% of pensioners live in poverty and that no less than 50% of pensioners suffer fuel poverty. A 2007-08 report stated that 62% of older people aged between 65 and 74 reported having a long-standing illness. For those aged 75 and older, the percentage increases to 67% for males and 72% for females, with the figure of 38% for the population as a whole.

What is more, older people represent an ever growing percentage of our population. Estimates suggest that by 2041, 42% of the population will be aged 50 or over; persons of pensionable age will represent 25% of our population; and the percentage of those aged 75 and over will double, to at least 14%. The recently published report by the Registrar General highlights that, over the next five decades, our population is projected to age faster than that of Scotland, England or Wales. By 2058, it is projected that there will be at least 500,000 people here aged 65 and over. The report also notes that although life expectancy has improved, only half of those aged over 65 will remain in good health. That will have implications for the provision of care and other services.

Given those facts and projections and the absence of a body with a specific focus on the interests and rights of older people, we are determined to proceed with the appointment of the commissioner. We are also determined that the commissioner will have the necessary powers and resources to promote and safeguard the interests and rights of older people.

We are taking this measure forward at a time of financial constraints, and Members have, rightly, drawn attention to the need to ensure value for money. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister shares that view and will ensure that all public services are delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible. We are critically examining all aspects of our Department's expenditure, including funding for sponsored public bodies and the potential for

reducing costs through the sharing of resources, where appropriate, among sponsor bodies.

However, I share the view that several Committee members expressed during Consideration Stage that establishing an office for a Commissioner for Older People is something that we cannot afford not to do. Indeed, it could lead to considerable savings for the public purse.

10.45 am

The commissioner will be proactive in ensuring early intervention when needs arise, rather than later in the process when costs can be greater. By bringing forward the legislation and establishing the Commissioner for Older People now, we are taking a strategic and long-term view of the issues of an ageing population and ensuring that there is a dedicated focal point for older people and that older people here have the strong, independent voice and protection that they deserve. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Dr Farry): On behalf of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I thank junior Minister Kelly for moving the Final Stage of the Commissioner for Older People Bill. In addition, I acknowledge the very important role played by the Department, at ministerial level and by officials, in getting the legislation to this stage. This area has been of long-standing interest among MLAs and, indeed, a long-standing commitment of the Assembly, so I am sure that everyone is pleased that we are at the Final Stage.

As everyone is aware, research shows that older people represent a growing percentage of our population. Estimates suggest that, by 2041, 42% of our population will be over 50, 25% will be of pensionable age — whatever age that might be — and 14% will be 75 or over. The Bill will provide for a Commissioner for Older People, who will ensure that older people's voices are heard and that there is a positive attitude to older people and a co-ordinated and holistic approach to matters that affect older people's lives. The commissioner will be able to investigate complaints made by older people against relevant authorities and to conduct formal investigations into the actions of relevant authorities as defined in schedule 3.

During its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee considered in detail the issue of investigatory powers, and, during evidence sessions with stakeholders and the Department, sought to ensure that the scope and possible remit for the commissioner will be large enough and cover areas that other investigatory bodies do not cover. The Committee was briefed by officials on potential gaps in investigatory powers; the areas into which the Commissioner for Older People's powers will extend; and what the commissioner will be able to investigate. During that briefing, the Committee was advised that there were still many areas affecting older people's lives directly where no statutory organisation had the power to act. In addition, the Committee received a briefing paper highlighting 29 possible areas in which the Commissioner for Older People could investigate and providing a number of real-life examples of where the commissioner could have been involved.

The Committee also received an assurance from the Department that the residual clauses place limits on the powers of the commissioner and ensure that, where an existing body already has responsibility for a statutory complaints process, the commissioner cannot investigate. That avoids situations in which two publicly funded organisations might be involved in the same case. The Committee was content that the powers in the Bill were appropriate, and, therefore, it strongly supports the Bill and welcomes the progress made.

At this stage, Mr Speaker, I shall make a few comments on behalf of me and my party. I acknowledge and respect Dame Joan Harbison's pioneering actions in respect of older persons' issues and her role as their advocate, which the junior Minister outlined. In addition, I acknowledge and respect the level of interest and support from Age Sector Platform and Age NI when lobbying for the Bill. Furthermore, as we enter the halfway point of the final year of this Assembly's mandate, it is worth acknowledging civil society's substantially increased level of sophistication when interacting with the Assembly. What has happened in and around the Bill is a very good example of that growing awareness and interest and of the ability to influence how decisions are taken. All that certainly stands to the betterment of society.

Like the junior Minister, I am conscious of the range of issues that older persons face in this society. However, it is also important that

we do not view older people simply as people with problems to be addressed. In fact, we should regard them as people with a continuing contribution to make to society, whether through the community and voluntary sector, continuing to work or the family role that some people play as carers.

That said, we have to acknowledge acute issues such as fuel poverty, deprivation, loneliness and a range of health issues and the importance of good inter-generational respect and understanding. It is worth stressing again that there is very strong evidence to suggest that socio-economic circumstances have a major impact on life expectancy for older people. We need to be conscious of that and take action on it.

Concern has been raised about the cost of creating the post, and we must be conscious of that in the current financial circumstances. I was pleased that junior Minister Kelly stressed that it can be viewed as an important investment in our society, and that not to do it would be a false economy. An older person's commissioner's office, with proper teeth and the ability to influence government and point out where government needs to correct things, will be a much more efficient and effective use of the scarce resources available to us. The Government can save more money if they can move more quickly to address issues that arise, rather than leaving problems to fester. If we have to intervene later in the day, the statutory obligations that will have to be met will, inevitably, incur further costs.

The creation of the post of older people's commissioner is an important step towards facilitating a more efficient and effective use of resources that will not be an additional burden on the public purse. I appreciate that there are concerns about the creation of another body at a time when people are talking about the need for rationalisation in government. It is important that we give the older person's commissioner the chance to prove the new body's relevance to society unencumbered for at least a number of years.

Having said that, there may well be a time when we will have to look at how we rationalise the various existing investigatory bodies; and it is important to make a couple of points in that regard. First, issues relating to older people will be with us forever, and, as the demographic balance of society changes, the relevance of

those issues will become a lot clearer. The need for a body with teeth must be part and parcel of that. If there is to be some rationalisation, it is important that the Assembly makes it clear that there should be no diminution of the powers and responsibilities of the older person's commissioner's functions, even if the body ends up in a new institutional structure in the future.

We must protect the body and ensure that it can deal with the issues. I do not envisage having to face that situation for some time, but it is important to put down markers today about how we see the future of the body unfolding. This is a day to be welcomed, and the vast numbers of older people in our society who have shown interest in the issue will also welcome it. I look forward to seeing the progress of this new function over the months and years to come, and I hope that it sparks real change in the way in which government interacts with senior citizens in this society. It is fundamentally about respect, understanding, giving people opportunities and addressing real needs where they exist.

Mr Spratt: My party welcomes the Final Stage of this very important piece of legislation. It has been in development for over three years, and we are pleased at the level of input from more than 400 older people, as well as 10 written evidence submissions to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and oral evidence submissions from five organisations. The We Agree campaign's aim and objectives have been supported by approximately 2,500 people and 120 organisations. This is a prime example of how devolution is working for the people of Northern Ireland, because it shows that local people are influencing local legislation.

That is to be welcomed, and I am pleased that the legislation is coming into its final stages and will put the new commissioner in place. Imagine how long the process would have taken under direct rule; it does not bear thinking about.

It has been said that, over the next 15 years, one quarter of our population will be over the age of 60. That is proportionally higher than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It is, therefore, essential that we build a framework in our society whereby older people can continue to participate in employment and have access to benefits such as pension credit and access to further and higher education. My staff in

my constituency office work hard to ensure that older people who come in receive all the benefits to which they are entitled. More often than not, older people are not aware of what they can claim, and the Commissioner for Older People can and will ensure that the level of benefit take-up is increased.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [MrMcClarty] in the Chair)

In these difficult economic times, many people may question the cost and value of another commissioner, especially when there has been much discussion on the number of quangos and arm's-length bodies that already exist in Northern Ireland. However, according to figures released by Age Northern Ireland, the estimated annual cost is £1.5 million. Considering that there are 290,000 older people in Northern Ireland, the cost is less than 2p per older person per day. That is a small price to pay and is excellent value not just for the older population but for all of us as we age. Improving the position of older people will deliver better outcomes for us all now and in the future.

Age Northern Ireland and other voluntary sector organisations receive thousands of calls every year and often tackle the same problems over and over again. The commissioner will be able to tackle the root cause of such problems by using powers of investigation and review. Common issues can be resolved more efficiently by the commissioner making recommendations on policy and practice that, in turn, will be implemented by the various relevant agencies. The commissioner could have a duty to engage older people and thus give them an opportunity to contribute to the process.

As I said earlier, it is highly unlikely that we would be at this point if we did not have a devolved Government through which people have the power to shape and influence policy and decision-making. Age Northern Ireland has given some examples of situations where it would be appropriate for an older person's commissioner to step in, such as: access to transport, where people are entitled to free bus passes but where there is inconsistent provision of rural and community transport; lack of benefit take-up, where there is potential for improvement if automatic payments of pension credit are introduced; the withdrawal of age-based concessionary fees in employment and learning would be another major step forward; variation

in nutritional standards for meals on wheels; and the malnutrition of older people in hospitals.

When I last spoke during a debate on the Commissioner for Older People Bill, I highlighted that I had recently been in and out of hospital on a regular basis to visit someone close to me. I have seen older people being left with food in front of them, and they have not been encouraged to eat that food. The commissioner will be able to tackle those sorts of issues and highlight the problems that exist, and will continue to exist, in a very busy Health Service in which, for instance, old people need encouragement to take food that is set down in front of them.

The issues that I mentioned are very serious, and, when Northern Ireland has its own Commissioner for Older People, he or she will be able to tackle the problems faced by older people today and plan ahead so that future generations of older people will enjoy an even better quality of life.

11.00 am

Before I close, I want to pay tribute to Dame Joan Harbison, the interim commissioner, for all her hard work — and she did work extremely hard. I do not have the same consideration for some commissioners, but Dame Joan attended meetings the length and breadth of the Province. All of us are indebted to you, Dame Joan, for the real commitment and dedication that you gave as interim commissioner. The DUP wants to thank you for all that you have done. You never gave up on that very valid case and kept presenting it, and that bore fruit in the Committee and, indeed, in consultations with the Ministers, which you did regularly. Well done, and thank you for that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member please refer all remarks through the Chair?

Mr Spratt: I have no problem, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the Chair will agree that Dame Joan has done a wonderful job. It is my pleasure and that of my party to support the Bill.

Ms M Anderson: Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don Bhille. I am delighted to be here to support the Bill, particularly as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee engaged with the sectors and with the different phases of the Bill as it came through the

Committee. There are plenty of examples that make the Bill worthwhile and show how much the Commissioner for Older People is needed. Indeed, the Minister has highlighted some of those, as have others, particularly Jimmy Spratt, who is also a member of the Committee. Other members of the Committee who have since left played a sterling role when we were going through the phases of engaging with the sector and ensuring that we got the best possible Bill.

Around 18 months ago, many of us heard of a 69-year-old man who, allegedly, was refused treatment in a brain injury unit in the North because of the hospital's policy of not treating anyone with such an injury over the age of 60. At that time, no existing body had the power to intervene, but, if there had been an older people's commissioner at that time, she or he could have stepped in to review the adequacy and effectiveness of the services that were provided to older people. For instance, she or he would have been able to undertake a systemic review of the arbitrary age-based barriers, which no other body can currently do. That case definitely adds weight to reviews and evidence that have been presented before us all showing that older people may be being denied treatment that is offered to younger patients. That is an alarming concern that we all have in the Assembly.

We have also heard that, in some hospitals, the standards of hygiene and nutrition for older people fall well below the minimum standards. Last July, we heard and saw that some older patients were malnourished because they were unable to eat the food provided. Every one of us will agree that that is an absolute shame, because some of those matters can be fixed so simply. For instance, non-pureed food can be given to patients with swallowing difficulties, and it takes seconds to perform that task. Food trays can be moved up instead of being placed at the end of the bed. Trays have been left out of reach and no help or encouragement given to people to eat. Food trays were left untouched with no questions asked or remedial action taken.

The commissioner will be alert to issues that affect older people. She or he will be able to conduct a holistic review where those issues might get lost among the pressures and priorities of other bodies. As Minister Kelly said, the Commissioner for Older People will be like no other body.

In previous debates, the Assembly discussed how various agencies must work together, rather than duplicate one another's work. Nutrition is a good example of an area where collaboration between the Commissioner for Older People and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) might have identified and remedied the problem at an earlier stage. Together, bodies complement each other and add value to their work. They can integrate the perspective of older people's rights and needs into an overarching approach to improving standards. They can undertake joint reviews or use evidence gathered through the commissioner's special expertise on older people to inform the RQIA's recommendations on standards. In fact, together the RQIA and the Commissioner for Older People offer the possibility to close a gap in health and personal social services for older people.

We in the Chamber and others have heard in the media about confusion over the application of the Bill to people who are aged 50 and over. It is important to be clear that, in fact, the Bill applies mainly to people aged 60 and over. That said, the commissioner may, in certain circumstances only, pursue a matter that concerns someone who is aged 50 or over, where a matter of principle is concerned, as well as in exceptional circumstances. Those provisions are sensible. For some people with a lower life expectancy, such as Travellers, 50 may be equivalent to 60 for the rest of us. Being able to pursue a matter of principle will also be one means of future-proofing; it will allow the commissioner to tackle a fundamental issue earlier and prevent a worse problem in later years.

The commissioner will have authority under the Bill to safeguard and promote older people's rights and interests. I welcome the commissioner's powers to issue guidance on best practice, conduct investigations and make representations and recommendations:

"to any body or person about any matter concerning the interests of older persons."

That is to be welcomed. We absolutely need a champion with strong powers who will prioritise older people and achieve solutions on their behalf. It is important that the commissioner has powers not only to assist older people to take complaints and in legal proceedings but to conduct formal investigations and to require

information on the implementation of any recommendation.

All agree that the Bill has, undoubtedly, been improved with the amendments that we made in the Chamber in November. Unquestionably, several of those amendments were made at the suggestion of the age sector and the interim advocate. Junior Minister Newton, who spoke that day, told the House that the sole purpose of any restriction under clause 8(2) (b) is to avoid duplication with the work of other bodies and that it is not intended to stymie the commissioner in carrying out his or her key functions. There is the possibility for amendments in the future, should that prove to be an impediment. The junior Minister also added other relevant authorities to the list. He said that that could be done if it became apparent that it was necessary to do so. Therefore, every effort has, undoubtedly, been made to ensure that the commissioner is a strong, independent voice for older people, and rightly so. No single organisation in the North has the range of powers and functions that the Commissioner for Older People will have.

The commissioner will bring together expertise and focus to protect and enhance older people's rights and interests in the widest sense. As I have said, those powers and duties will add value to existing bodies and arrangements. The commissioner will help us all to take a longer-term view of ageing, which will benefit older people now and, undoubtedly, as Minister Kelly said, the rest of us in the future.

I am delighted to support the Bill, and I pay tribute to the participatory democracy that we saw at work. The age sector and the Older People's Advocate came to the Committee, together with trade unions and others, and strengthened the Bill by suggesting some of the amendments that were discussed by the House in November. I am proud to have had the privilege of working with those in the age sector who engaged with MLAs to strengthen the Bill and make it the best Bill possible.

I pay tribute to the OFMDFM Committee staff, who assisted Committee members greatly as the Bill progressed. I also pay tribute to my colleagues for the debates and discussions that we had in Committee. At least, the sector will find itself with a Bill that it believes will address the needs of many people we know, some of whom are in our own families and whom we love

dearly. Hopefully, those people will benefit from having a Commissioner for Older People.

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on progressing the Bill to its Final Stage. I apologise on behalf of my party leader and the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Tom Elliott, for his absence. I know that he would also acknowledge all the hard work that has been done by Dame Joan Harbison and the representative groups.

On a personal note, as a reasonably new boy in the Chamber and a very new Committee member, I must say how impressed I was in all my meetings with the various groups in south Antrim and by all the hard work that they do for themselves and others. It was great fun meeting them and listening to them. They always conduct their work with a bit of mirth, and I enjoyed it all. They are an example to us all.

The Bill will address two key matters. First, it will allow for the promotion of the full participation of older people in our society. We must ensure that all people have the opportunity to fully engage and participate in society, their local community, work and family life, irrespective of their age. An advocate for older people will facilitate that necessary goal. We must ensure that people have the opportunity to take part and make a contribution. We must also recognise that every citizen should be respected and have their viewpoint promoted.

The second thing that the Bill will achieve is the better protection of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Other Members have quoted the statistics; I will not go into them again. Whether it is poverty, fear of crime, understanding care needs, getting payments that are due or mediating or investigating disputes, the statistics show that infinitely better representation of older people is needed and needed now. The weather that we are all facing brings home the reality that many older people are unable to heat their home, get out to shop for necessities or have significant contact with other people in their community. A commissioner working as an advocate for older people will raise the profile of those issues and hopefully enable swifter resolutions by working with the Assembly, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector. Indeed, being swift and dynamic is essential, as is

the commissioner having effective teeth at all times, rather than being, as it has been put, a “toothless tiger”.

As the Bill passed through its stages, the Ulster Unionist Party raised a number of concerns, which it still has. There is a danger that the investigatory role of the Commissioner for Older People will overlap and duplicate the role of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman and a number of our existing commissions. In these times of fiscal constraint, it is crucial that all resources go to front line services and to those who are most in need. We must minimise duplication and inefficiency. It is for that reason that we should take great care as we proceed with the setting up of the office of the Commissioner for Older People to make it as efficient and effective as possible. We should not shy away from reviewing its practices as we go forward.

The Ulster Unionist Party, having noted its limited concerns, is happy to support the Bill. We look forward to working with whomever is appointed as the Commissioner for Older People to promote the rights and needs of people who play such an invaluable role in our society. My party and I support the Bill.

11.15 am

Mrs M Bradley: I, too, welcome the Bill. It has been talked about since I first came here as an elected Member, and I am delighted that it has come to fruition for older people.

Throughout the debates, the SDLP made its reservations about the Bill clear. That was not to undermine the post of the commissioner but because we want to see a powerful, effective commissioner acting for older people and not one whose powers are restricted through all manner of constraints. We want the commissioner to act when another body fails to do so and when action ought to be taken. However, we want the commissioner not to act if he believes that the case has merit, would be unfair to older people and would undermine the role and authority of the commissioner.

Many older people depend heavily on the social care system, which should provide quality of care in a fair, equitable and sustainable way. Some carers are also elderly. Let us remind ourselves of the amount of money that carers save us each year. I think that it is about £3 billion, which is quite an amount of money that older people save for us. That is not to mention

their voluntary work and taking care of their grandchildren. They are to be congratulated on their lifestyles. I am proud to be the spokesperson for older people, since I am one myself.

The Budget may be under pressure in the present economic climate, but we have a moral responsibility not to let the burden fall unfairly on the vulnerable. We can choose to use resources more effectively to promote the health and well-being of older people, and the Commissioner for Older People can more effectively bring older people and their views into the debate, to assist, plan and target resources.

I urge the relevant authorities to be responsive to the commissioner's approaches and recommendations, and I urge other commissions and bodies to collaborate with the Commissioner for Older People. We want to see solid memorandums of understanding between commissioners so that they can deliver properly for older people.

I welcome the Bill and am glad that it is before the House before Christmas. May I, through you Mr Deputy Speaker, pay tribute to Dame Joan Harbison on her good work over the months that she has been in post? I also congratulate those who work with older people, all year, every year. I hope that the Bill will be successful and that older people will get more care from it.

Mr Humphrey: I support the passage of the Commissioner for Older People Bill. The creation of an office to advance and protect the interests of older people is long overdue, and it is likely to prove to be one of the most important achievements of the Northern Ireland Assembly to date.

Given its significance to my North Belfast constituency, I must mention a number of statistics. North Belfast has the third largest population of over-60s of all Northern Ireland constituencies. Obscenely, all those people can expect to die up to 10 years earlier than folk in other constituencies. They are also much more likely to suffer a limiting long-term illness in their latter years. So, how we treat older people and address their needs is of enormous importance to me and to the people I represent.

All of us are all too well aware of the political power wielded by older people when they are so minded. Our surgeries and postbags are a testament to that. There is also a confident lobby of older people, organised by dedicated

local voluntary organisations, such as those that came together to establish the older people's platform for Northern Ireland. Their support for this legislation should be instructive for all Members.

The irony is that, although older people are among some of the strongest in our community, many are among the most vulnerable. The infirmity of old age can render previously independent individuals reliant on the support of others to meet even the most basic of personal needs. It is at that time that the principles of independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity, which are enshrined in the commissioner's role, are at their most important. With that in mind, I am particularly pleased that Ministers have taken on board the concerns expressed by a variety of stakeholders during the consultations and have widened the commissioner's remit to encompass the protection of all residents of nursing homes and residential homes, including those who pay for their care. It is critically important that no older person is allowed to fall through the net. I also welcome the reassurance from Ministers that administrative muddle will be avoided while maximum protection is provided to older people. The promise of regular reviews of co-operation by the Commissioner for Older People will also be important in that regard.

It is important that, while recognising the important role that the commissioner will play in addressing and preventing the inappropriate treatment of senior citizens, we do not lose sight of the equally important role that the office will have in positively promoting the role of older people in our society. It would be to the great disadvantage of Northern Ireland if we were to overlook the enormous contribution older people can and do make to our families and communities throughout the country. Whether as carers ensuring that young parents can be economically active or as trainers who can pass on workplace knowledge and skills built up over the decades, older people have a huge amount to give.

Increasingly, older people will be required to remain economically active, and it will be important for us to ensure that the right approaches are put in place to ensure that future generations do not find themselves faced with an old age lived in poverty. It is also easy to underestimate the importance of older people in our community, and it must be remembered

that they represent a growing proportion of our population. If older people are in our communities, our communities are much richer; if they are not, communities are the poorer for that. It is important that vital facilities and services are sustained at a level that ensures the dignity of the older people in our community.

Whether the issue is employment, housing, health, education, crime or community safety, we have to understand that all Departments have a role to play. We have to understand that the impact of an ageing population is one of the biggest issues facing Northern Ireland in the twenty-first century. I too, on behalf of those of us on these Benches, commend the interim commissioner and Older People's Advocate, Dame Joan Harbison, for her role in the formation of the Bill. As we move forward, the role of the Commissioner for Older People in making sure that we have a coherent approach to those matters will be of huge importance. The passage of the Bill represents an enormous first step, not only for older people but for all of us, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too welcome and support the Bill. I read a piece in 'The Irish News' on 4 December by a journalist whose comments sum up the lack of understanding of why a Commissioner for Older People is required. Having unnecessarily attacked the Age Sector Platform and taken a cheap shot at it, he spoke about the creation of a quango — his word, not mine. He then referred to the potential cost of the Commissioner for Older People and stated that the approximately £2 million that it will cost:

"would cover 8,000 cold weather fuel payments, 5,000 full tanks of heating oil or a month's electricity for 40,000 households."

Although I cannot argue about his grasp of mathematics, I can certainly argue about his attitude to the Commissioner for Older People. He went on to refer to:

"the pointlessness of the Older Person's Commissioner".

Again, those are his words, not mine. He also stated:

"benefits are set in London and even the whole of Stormont cannot lobby to change them."

The creation of the commissioner is not just about money; it is about giving older people a

strong and effective voice in our society and giving them the opportunity to be included in policy decisions that directly affect them. It is about recognising their contribution to society and not continuing to make them feel marginalised and isolated. Benefits were mentioned, and almost £2 million is unclaimed weekly in pension credits, which needs to be urgently addressed.

Interestingly, I listened to the radio this morning and heard discussion of the Budget that is coming down the line in the Twenty-six Counties. The point was made that pensions in the South, which will not be affected by the Budget, are almost twice as high as those in the North, and that in an economy that is, apparently, bankrupt.

At Further Consideration Stage, I referred to the number of people over 50 years of age in the North who are economically active. That is expected to rise by some 30,000 or 50,000 by 2020. As Members heard, a large proportion of them will be over 60, and we must move quickly to bring their rights in line with those of others by removing the default retirement age in our employment regulations. Research by Age UK shows that 100,000 people were forced to retire in 2009 alone. With the change in the economic climate, many older people will need or wish to work after age 65, and they should not be denied the opportunity to benefit from working if they are able to do so.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research has estimated that extending the average working life by one effective year could increase GDP by around 1%. We should not fear that that will necessarily displace younger workers. One economic commentator who was concerned about the impact of the minimum wage on employment admitted recently that the biggest job increases in Britain came in the period when the minimum wage rose most, probably because of the economic regeneration that comes with extra spending power. Putting extra spending power in the pockets of older people will also help regeneration and employment. While the Equality Commission has a lead role in employment matters, it should work alongside the Commissioner for Older People, who will play the leading role in changing how we view ageing and, I hope, start the cultural change that will get rid of outdated custom and practice.

We must recognise and value the continuing contribution that older people make to society as employers and employees, as well as mentors, carers, volunteers and grandparents. Two fifths of single pensioners and one fifth of pensioner couples have no income other than the state retirement pension and state benefits. These proportions are more than double those in Britain. We know that we have a higher proportion of older people living in poverty and that only 19% of those are receiving pension credit. Older people can be unaware of what they are entitled to — that has already been mentioned. They can find the claims system complicated. Some shy away from claiming, not appreciating that it is simply what they are due. If they received their full benefits, there would also be some positive knock-on effect for the economy. A Commissioner for Older People could examine deficits in that area and add authority to the case for introducing automatic payment of benefits. I am sure that the Northern and Welsh commissioners will find common cause in this and other matters at Westminster.

The very state of the economy and public finances, with the surrounding pressures to reduce services and restrict access, offers the best reason for the appointment of a Commissioner for Older People. The future must look difficult and worrying from where older people stand. They need not just a champion but someone who will work tirelessly to see that their interests are protected and their rights extended and applied. I want to see an effective commissioner with strong powers, someone who will not stand back from exercising the powers of the office over relevant authorities and bodies — public, private or voluntary agencies — where that is necessary and who will keep MLAs informed and tell us how legislation can be improved and advise us on what more can be done. Older people need to be and should be involved in the commissioner's appointment, and I urge Ministers to allocate sufficient resources for the job ahead and move forward quickly with the appointment. I also pay tribute to Age NI, the Age Sector Platform and Joan Harbison for the work that they have done and continue to do to promote the rights of older people.

Mr Bresland: I begin by declaring an interest: I am officially an older person. Even if I were not, I would have no hesitation in supporting the Bill. It is very welcome, as the former First Minister Lord Bannside said when the announcement was made about the establishment of a

Commissioner for Older People. Our hope is that the commissioner will provide older people with a strong and confident voice. This Bill will do that.

It can be argued that we have enough commissioners of one sort or another, but this Bill addresses a significant section of society. We have a growing population of older people, and we welcome that. Older people add something to society. They have wisdom and experience. In their day they played their part. They worked hard, reared families and struggled with the pressures of life. We owe it to them to ensure that they enjoy a high quality of life in old age.

11.30 am

That presents us with some bigger challenges. I often hear from older constituents that they feel as though they are less important than young people and that they are made to feel as though they are a burden to society. That ought not to be. The setting up of a Commissioner for Older People should make a big difference.

It is important that the new office is run as efficiently as possible. I strongly urge the use of shared resources and a close link with older people's commissioners in the rest of the UK. I support the Bill.

Mrs D Kelly: At this stage, there is not much left to say about welcoming the Bill, except, of course, that all Members share one common ambition, which is to live to be old ourselves. Therefore, it is important to get the services right. I hope that the work of the commissioner will ensure that the service delivery is right and meaningful for the people whom the commissioner is charged to represent.

I listened carefully to the contributions made by other Members. Quite frankly, as a former health and social care worker, I was appalled at some of the lists that were given of work that the commissioner would have to be seen to challenge. Basic nutritional care is basic nursing care. Unfortunately, it seems that some of our health and social care professionals, for whatever reason, have travelled far from the delivery of the most basic service provision, which is ensuring that people have a good and proper diet. It is most regrettable. There may be myriad reasons why that has happened. Obviously, it is the responsibility, not only of the charge nurse, ward manager or residential care worker, but the regulatory authorities, in particular the health and social care inspectorate. To ensure

that scant resources are not targeted at areas that are the responsibility of other professionals or, indeed, inspection authorities, it is necessary to ensure that, from the outset, it is clearly distinguished when the commissioner should and must get involved.

Many people, in many senses, relished the challenge of getting the Bill before the House. There was a great campaign, and I pay tribute to those who took part in it. I also pay tribute to my fellow members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their hard work over the past two years in hearing evidence and examining the Bill. However, the challenge now is whether there will be sufficient money in the budget in the coming years to ensure that the commissioner's office is well resourced and that it has the money behind it to do the job that is required of the commissioner. That is a challenge that we will, I hope, know more about over the next few weeks. I am sure that we will all have views on that.

Mr McCarthy: This is an excellent morning. It is a brilliant morning. It is a morning on which I, as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, am proud to stand in the Chamber. When something exciting happens in Northern Ireland, our chant is, "Hip hip hooray!" So, this morning, on behalf of thousands of senior citizens, I say, "Hip hip hooray!" that we have reached the Final Stage of the Commissioner for Older People Bill. It has been a long time coming, but we are here, and I fully support the Final Stage.

I remember when, shortly after the Northern Ireland Assembly was set up in 1998, I was chairperson of the age sector reference group, as it was called then. People such as David McConnell, Bob Gibson, Tom Cairns, Paddy Joe McClean and other representatives from all over Northern Ireland met up here to campaign for the needs of older people, including the need for a commissioner with full legislative powers.

At that time, I was only a junior. I now have to declare an interest as being in the senior bracket, but I am not ashamed of that. I am proud to be a senior and have much to offer the community that I serve.

I am extremely happy to see this day. As a result of local devolution, the Age Sector Platform, as it is now called, Age NI and others have already seen valuable improvements in issues that we set out to achieve in 1998.

I pay tribute to everyone who campaigned, including, as has been said, Dame Joan Harbison, who has been to the forefront of the campaign, and all my Assembly colleagues, who listened to the people who marched up and down. I am proud to see senior citizens from County Down and County Fermanagh on the We Agree campaign postcard. I also see Tom Elliott in the middle of that picture. Tom is not a senior citizen, but there he is, with all the others, supporting the We Agree campaign. I pay tribute to all who were involved in that.

Other people and I fully support the recent We Agree campaign. Hundreds of senior citizens went onto the streets, came up to Stormont, wrote to the Committee and did almost everything that they could to convince the Department of the need for a good, strong, independent commissioner with sufficient powers to protect the interests of our senior citizens.

As has been said, the commissioner needs to have powers to keep legislation, policy and practice under review; to mediate when disputes arise; to investigate and undertake casework; to respond to approaches from senior citizens; and to resolve all issues.

The We Agree campaign produced a strong document, of which I have a copy here, supporting the need for a Commissioner for Older People. That document contains 30 recommendations, all of which, in my opinion, are achievable. I appeal to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to get to work on those recommendations.

Much more could be said in support of the Bill in its Final Stage. However, I conclude by saying well done to everyone, including the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which is represented today by the junior Ministers. The Alliance Party fully supports the Bill.

Mr G Robinson: I concur with all my colleagues in welcoming the Bill's coming to fruition. As my colleague Jimmy Spratt said, that is testimony to our devolved Government here in Stormont, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Committee staff and the Ministers who worked so tirelessly to deliver the Bill. We all have a duty to our elderly people, who, particularly at this time of year, require so much more extra heating, food on the table and a safe environment in which to live. We feel that the commissioner designate must have as much power as possible to ensure that

the new office has control over older people's welfare.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to the interim commissioner, Dame Joan Harbison, for the excellent job that she has done for our elderly people. I welcome all the senior citizens who have come to the Public Gallery today even though the weather is so severe.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I

convey my thanks to everyone who contributed to today's debate.

I was in the Great Hall earlier, where the members of the public who now fill the Public Gallery were gathering. They challenged me, to some extent, to declare an interest in the matter, as I did during the consultation meetings that were held around the country. Along with Mr Bresland and others, I declare an interest.

Like Minister Kelly, I, too, am delighted that we are here today debating the Final Stage of this groundbreaking piece of legislation, which will lead to the establishment of a Commissioner for Older People, who will make a real contribution to promoting and protecting the interests and rights of older people in Northern Ireland. Kieran McCarthy said that it is a good day. It is a good news day. That is the truth of the matter.

Stephen Farry and Dolores Kelly said that we all recognise that there is an ageing population, and it is an issue that we cannot ignore. That applies not just here but right across the UK and wider afield. Declining birth rates and increased life expectancy will place an ever-increasing burden on our resources and will present new challenges in how we address the needs and concerns of older people.

Our commitment in the Programme for Government to provide a strong, independent voice for older people was an early recognition by the Executive that we need to be at the forefront of action worldwide to begin providing a new and alternative way for older people to express their concerns about how society views and treats them. Providing such a mechanism for older people to articulate concerns was one aspect of a two-pronged approach that seeks to provide a powerful public voice, whereby those concerns can be addressed by an independent commissioner who will be able to articulate views at the very highest level of government,

and to take action on behalf of older people's interests.

Throughout the process, I have had the opportunity to meet many people and organisations who have been campaigning, and I attended and spoke at several public consultation meetings. I want to reiterate what many Members have said today, which is how impressed we have been, and continue to be, with the energy and passion displayed by older people when they get an opportunity to have their voices heard.

By establishing a commissioner here, we will provide another strong voice. It is a groundbreaking development, and I have no shame about using that term again. With the exception of Wales, no other European country has a commissioner of this type. As my party colleague Mr Spratt said, this is a landmark piece of legislation that the Assembly has brought forward, and it is an example of a local Assembly responding to the needs of local people.

I will now touch on a number of points that were raised during today's debate and earlier debates and will seek to address quickly some of the questions raised.

Minister Kelly pointed out in his speech the concern about the potential duplication of work of the commissioner with that of other oversight bodies. That issue was raised during the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill, and Mr Kinahan mentioned it today. In developing a case for a commissioner, we commissioned a report from Deloitte, the consultancy organisation. In its final report, it examined the potential costs of establishing a commissioner, based on a wide range of issues. Deloitte estimated that the initial set-up costs would be approximately £500,000, with a budget anticipated to be around £1.5 million. Those set-up costs and running costs are broadly in line with those incurred by the Welsh Assembly when it established its Commissioner for Older People. We are determined to proceed with the appointment of the commissioner and to provide him or her with the necessary resources to promote and safeguard the interests and rights of older people.

We are confident that the concerns of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have been addressed. First, there is evidence of real gaps in oversight provision, which we provided to the Committee and with which it was content. Secondly, the sole purpose of some provisions in the Bill is

to avoid duplication of the commissioner's work with that of other bodies that already possess the responsibility, expertise and publicly funded resources to act on a complaint raised by an older person. Thirdly, we will highlight the importance of that issue to the commissioner upon appointment, as well as the importance of agreeing memoranda of understanding with appropriate oversight bodies to clarify roles and responsibilities.

Finally, the Bill contains a review mechanism. The commissioner will have a legal obligation to carry out reviews of the adequacy and effectiveness of the legislation. The commissioner can make recommendations to amend the legislation, if that is considered appropriate. In the first instance, such a review must be carried out as soon as possible after three years of the Act coming into force and, at the latest, every five years thereafter. However, as I explained during Consideration Stage, if significant difficulties arise, Ministers will move ahead of the review process to address and to remedy the problems and, if necessary, to amend the Act.

11.45 am

It is important in these considerations to stress that no single organisation has the range of powers and functions that the commissioner will have. The commissioner will concentrate in a holistic and strategic manner on the rights and interests of older people. That point was made by Martina Anderson.

I want to reiterate Minister Kelly's point on cost and value for money. I have already said that we are determined to proceed with the appointment and to provide the commissioner with the necessary powers and resources to promote and to safeguard older persons' interests. The needs of an increasingly ageing population present issues that cannot be ignored. Given the compelling statistics that many Members referred to today, I believe that, now more than ever, we need a commissioner to protect the rights of older people. Ensuring value for money has been a consideration throughout the process, and many individuals and organisations that responded to the public consultation provided practical solutions as to how best to ensure that. We will, of course, ensure that all public services are being delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Let me agree with the valid point that was made by Mr Spratt. A measure of the efficiency and effectiveness of the consultation is that it cost only £13 a person. That takes into account all costs. That is a measure of how seriously OFMDFM has taken the matter of efficiency and effectiveness.

I pay tribute to those who were involved in the consultation process, especially those from OFMDFM. The manner in which the consultation process was undertaken and the relationship that was built with the lobby groups from the age sector, as they lobbied meetings, for instance, are examples of good practice. I believe that the processes used could be written up as an example of an effective way of moving legislation through the Chamber and of how to consult on, react to and process matters.

We are committed to critically examining all aspects of the Department's expenditure, including the funding for sponsored public bodies and the potential to reduce costs through the sharing of resources among sponsored bodies. George Robinson made that point.

A concern expressed during the development process was the need to ensure that the commissioner will have the power to make a real difference to older people. When making his case for North Belfast and, in doing so, talking about the lifespan of some of the people who live in his constituency, Mr Humphrey made the case about the complexities in that situation.

I can confirm that the commissioner will have a wide range of powers, including the power to conduct a formal investigation into a complaint, with High Court powers to call for persons, papers and evidence, as well as the power of entry and inspection. If someone were to attempt to obstruct a commissioner, those powers would be backed up with the offence of contempt.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that the effectiveness of the commissioner's work will be in the outworking of their powers and the practical impact of that on older peoples' lives? For example, the age bar, which was referred to earlier, that is placed on access to the regional acquired brain injury unit worked adversely against my constituent Mr Michael Hanratty. Does he agree that the commissioner's effectiveness and success will be judged against how they deal with issues such as the age bar and in removing that type of discrimination?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his intervention. Obviously, a very serious situation arose with his constituent and I do not want to minimise that in any way. If the Member is patient, I will come to that at the end of my speech.

The commissioner will be able to intervene or assist in a court case involving the interests of older people and provide assistance, including financial assistance, to an older person in a court case. As an alternative to legal proceedings, the commissioner will now also have the power to commission conciliation services to help to resolve a dispute more quickly. That power was added following public consultation.

To stand up for older people, the commissioner will have the power to advise Ministers, the Assembly, the Secretary of State and any body or person on any matter concerning that section of our community. The commissioner will be empowered to make recommendations to strengthen existing legislation. The commissioner can produce research to help to shape policy and services and to report on key issues that affect older people, such as transport, fuel poverty and finance. The commissioner will also have a wide range of promotional, advisory, educational and general investigatory functions, duties and powers to be deployed in the interests of older people, generally and individually.

Mr Bresland made the point about efficiency and value for money. I think that that may be seen through the shared resources, which I hope will, ultimately, bring about not only a solution for the Commissioner for Older People but for commissioners generally. Those powers will help the commissioner to fulfil the aims of protecting the interests of older people, and he or she will be able to influence the actions of many organisations and individuals that affect older people's lives in many different ways.

Mr Farry, speaking as the Deputy Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee, raised the issue of enforcement. As I have said already, the commissioner will be endowed with High Court powers to call for persons, papers and evidence. If someone were to obstruct the commissioner, those powers would be backed up with the offence of contempt. The commissioner will have the power to take legal action on behalf of older persons.

Mary Bradley expressed the early concerns of the OFMDFM Committee, or perhaps they were

her early concerns. The commissioner will bring together expertise and a focus on improving older persons' lives, and will be able to guide them through complex complaint mechanisms. They will also be able to advocate on their behalf, and, where necessary, investigate issues that do not fall within the remit of other statutory bodies.

The office of the Commissioner for Older People is unique: no existing organisation has the remit to address the wider impact to inform systemic improvements and influence wider social policy. I was intrigued by a point that was made by Mickey Brady. He emphasised the economic benefits of the Bill. I had not thought about that but, when one considers the Bill's potential to release increased benefits for older persons, it is clear that that is a very positive step.

Ultimately, what we want to achieve by establishing a commissioner is to have someone who will stand up for older people; someone who will challenge discrimination against older people and promote their participation in public life; someone who will investigate complaints on behalf of the sector; someone who will encourage best practice in the treatment of older people; and someone who will influence and shape government policy in the interests of older people. Ultimately, we want to have a society in which the voices of older people are heard and respected and their interests safeguarded and promoted.

If the Bill receives the Assembly's support today, the next stage will be Royal Assent, which should be completed in mid- to late January. The Bill will then, of course, become law. The next step after that is to begin the recruitment process for the appointment of the commissioner, and that is a process in which older people will be involved. My OFMDFM ministerial colleagues and I believe that the legislation will place the Assembly at the forefront of world opinion on how to successfully deal with the very real difficulties that all countries have to confront and the very real opportunities that will arise over the coming decades through having an older and, I am confident, wiser population. I commend the Commissioner for Older People Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Commissioner for Older People Bill [NIA 21/09] do now pass.

Private Members' Business

Autism Bill: Second Stage

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Autism Bill [NIA 2/10] be agreed.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm go bhfuil an Dara Céim den Bhille Uathachais sa Teach inniu.

The Bill consists of seven clauses. The first three clauses form the main part of the Bill, and they deal with the amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There should be only one Member on his or her feet. Members, please resume your seats.

Mr D Bradley: As I was saying, the main part of the Bill deals with the amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the autism strategy. The remaining four clauses concern interpretation, commencement, regulations and the short title.

I bring the Bill before the House on behalf of people with autism in Northern Ireland and on behalf of their families. I also bring it here on behalf of the all-party Assembly group on autism, of which I am chairperson, on my own behalf and on behalf of the SDLP Members of the all-party Assembly group on autism will speak in the debate and will acknowledge their membership of the group. I want to publicly thank the group's members for their commitment and support in the preparation of the Bill.

Second Stage deals with the general principles behind a Bill, and, in this case, they are quite straightforward: to ensure that people with autism in Northern Ireland are afforded the rights that are their due and that comprehensive services are provided to them and their families from their earliest years and throughout their lives on a cross-departmental basis, because, as we know, autism is a developmental disorder that affects the way in which a person communicates with, and relates to, other people throughout their whole life.

To ensure that people with autism have full access to the range of services that they need, it is necessary to have autism recognised under the Disability Discrimination Act as a social and communicative disorder that affects how they

make sense of the world around them. Autism is a spectrum condition, which means that, although all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in different ways and they will rely on a variety of services at various stages in their life.

12.00 noon

A triad of impairments largely defines autism. People with autism have difficulty with social interaction and with recognising and understanding other people's feelings and managing their own. Autism also includes difficulty in understanding how to interact with others, making it difficult for people with autism to form friendships, and that, in turn, leads to loneliness and isolation. There are also difficulties with social communication, including the use and understanding of verbal and non-verbal language, such as gestures, facial expression and tone of voice.

As regards social imagination, people with autism have difficulties in understanding and predicting other people's intentions and behaviour and imagining situations outside their own routine. That can be accompanied by a narrow, repetitive range of activities. Around 15% of people with autism are able to live a relatively independent life. Others, unfortunately, need a lifetime of specialist care. People with autism may also experience some form of sensory sensitivity or undersensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, lights or colours.

Asperger's syndrome is also a form of autism. People with it are often of average or above-average intelligence. They have fewer problems with speech but may still have difficulty understanding and processing language. People with Asperger's syndrome do not necessarily have learning disabilities but often have accompanying learning difficulties, such as dyslexia.

The Health Department's programmes of care for autism are inadequate because ASD is placed in the mental health and learning disability programme of care, with its budget coming from that for learning disability. Such an approach perpetuates the use of IQ as a gateway to services for people with ASD, and that means that 75% of people with ASD fall outside service entitlement. In amending the Disability Discrimination Act, the Bill will help to ensure that such people will no longer suffer discrimination due to that anomaly.

Along with the IQ anomaly, there is evidence that some public bodies use the DDA definition of disability as a guide in decision-making about the award of such benefits as disability living allowance. Some schools punish pupils with ASD for offences against the schools' codes of discipline for behavioural reactions that are beyond the students' control. Why is that happening? Simply because ASD is not recognised as a disability under the DDA, and that leads to the expectation that pupils will adhere to rules of behaviour to which, through no fault of their own, they cannot adhere. The amendment to the DDA will give clear guidance to government bodies, schools and other organisations, by ensuring that ASD is brought clearly within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act. For families, that measure will give recognition to a challenging condition that has been low in our society's hierarchy of disability.

When implemented across public bodies, the Bill has the potential to improve public understanding in general, as well as to improve issues such as access to services and buildings for individuals with ASD. Significantly, it will signal the beginning of the end of discrimination against individuals with ASD whose IQ is over 70.

By giving recognition to ASD in law, the Bill will make a practical and emotional difference to families through the systematic education of the public that will flow from adaptations to public spaces, facilities and services. The clarity that will come through ASD being recognised in law will bring a level of validity to those with a condition that is still treated with suspicion and indeed ignorance by some professionals and agencies. Clarity in law will guide decision-making about benefit entitlements and the updating of disability action plans for public bodies and improve access to equality legislation. Families will have a reference point for service entitlement and will no longer have to deal with the anomaly of the issue of an IQ of over 70. The physical adaptations to public buildings will assist not just people with ASD but the wider disabled community.

I hope that the Bill will take autism in from the cold to the mainstream of services and help to ensure that people, including many adults, who are denied services will receive the help and support that, by right, they should have now.

Mr Easton: As the Member knows, I fully support the Bill, but I have one disappointment in the removal from the Bill of plans for an advocate. Are there any plans for appointing an advocate, and how can that issue be dealt with?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I will address the issue that he raised later in my speech.

Autism is much more common in our society than many people know or believe. It is estimated that there are 17,000 people with autism in Northern Ireland. If we take into account immediate family members affected, autism touches the lives of a staggering 68,000-plus people. In August 2008, the National Autistic Society (NAS) in Northern Ireland commissioned a leading market research company to survey a sample of the Northern Ireland population on their awareness and understanding of autism. The survey clearly showed that 90% did not know how common autism is; only 48% of people had heard of Asperger's syndrome, which, as I said, is a form of autism; and 55% of people who had heard of autism thought it mostly if not only affected children. This Bill will raise public awareness and help to dissipate the ignorance around autism.

The gap in services that makes the Bill so necessary is evidenced by the 2008 NAS campaign, *I Exist*. That campaign highlighted the stark and often desperate reality for the majority of adults with autism in Northern Ireland, who do not receive the support and services that they so badly need. The report that accompanied the launch of that campaign showed that 96% of adults who took part in the survey felt that, with more support, they would feel less isolated. As a direct result of the lack of support, 34% of adults in the survey had experienced severe mental health difficulties; 65% had experienced anxiety; and 57% had suffered from depression. Most adults depend solely on their family for support. Sixty-four per cent of adults in the survey lived at home; 13% lived on their own; and only a quarter were financially independent.

Those statistics give us an indication of the reality of life for those with autism in Northern Ireland. Adults with autism who rely solely on their parents for support will, inevitably, face a time when their parents can no longer care for them. According to the survey, 83% of parents and carers are worried about what will happen

to their son or daughter when they can no longer support or care for them.

Autism Northern Ireland commissioned two related research reports on family support — 'The Hidden Community' and 'Is Anyone Listening?' — which focused on the human cost of living with autism. Among the intersecting issues from those investigations are the lack of recognition of the challenges that the disability presents to carers; the isolation that carers feel; and the requirement for constant combative lobbying to secure recognition and services. That is energy-sapping and often leaves people physically and emotionally drained and near to total exhaustion. The evidence shows that the stress levels of primary carers for family members who have autism are unique in the disability community. The latest local research gives us a sliding scale from 80% of mothers who experience high levels of anxiety through to 50% who are on long-term medication linked to trauma and stress. The need is clearly there among people of all ages who have autism and among those who care for them. This Bill can and will address that need and will make a real difference to their lives.

The Autism Bill will direct the establishment of a cross-cutting approach to autistic spectrum disorder by requiring the development of a cross-departmental strategy for autism. The historic failure to recognise ASD has left a tragic legacy of underfunding across Departments. All Departments will eventually have to address the impact of legislative change on their policies, practice and provision for people with ASD. Clause 2 creates a requirement for Departments to undertake that exercise together in an effort to minimise duplication and maximise effectiveness. I presume that there is wide consensus around the view that the development of single-Department ASD strategies by the Department of Health and, more recently, the Department of Education is in sharp contrast to the joined-up realities of life, where one life transition leads to another across home, education, employment and community.

In this climate of economic constraint it is incumbent on us all to plan smartly for future challenges. Not only is cross-departmental commitment to joint planning for ASD good practice, it is an opportunity to look afresh at how resources can be used or redeployed while challenging all Departments to work innovatively with the voluntary sector to maximise the

accountability, flexibility and creativity of all partners. By recognising in law the need for required cross-departmental planning and buy-in, the Bill will make a real difference to families. That measure assures families that the Government recognise the lifelong and whole-life commitment and reality of ASD, and it gives assurance of the potential of service development, even in harsh economic times, through shared funding initiatives across Departments. The Bill recognises that ASD is a shared responsibility in our community and that duplication and confusion can be addressed. It should also help to ensure that life transitions, which are uniquely distressing for individuals with autism, can be planned, resourced and well managed.

12.15 pm

The Bill deals with the accountability issue raised by Mr Easton by placing a duty on the Minister of the designated lead Department, namely the Health Department, to report to the Assembly every three years on the implementation of the autism strategy. The original draft of the Bill envisaged a commissioner to ensure accountability. However, the provision was withdrawn in light of current financial conditions. If, in future, the reporting mechanism needs additional back-up, consideration can be given to the possibility of a commissioner. I hope that that satisfies Mr Easton.

In advance of the publication of the draft Autism Bill, concerns focusing largely on the perceived implementation costs and the impact that such legislation would have on other disability groups were noted. All views were listened to carefully; that has been the policy of the all-party group since its establishment in 2008 in response to a six-year campaign by families committed to social change.

In the past, special separate measures, such as the three health and social care trust strategies for ASD, the Department of Health's strategy, the Department of Education's strategy, task force report, and guidance and policies and the education and library boards' ASD policies have been the approaches used, because existing, generic disability policies were seen to be inadequate. In 2008, the all-party group commissioned the only independent research on the systemic changes required by government to address the failures in ASD service prioritisation, provision and planning. That report, which was

produced by the Assembly's Research and Library Service, placed the need for legislation front and centre, and it concluded that individual departmental approaches, such as those mentioned, were seen as temporary fixes that would not work in the long term. According to the report, legislation was the best long-term solution.

More recently, in March and April 2010, consultation on the proposed legislation was conducted across statutory and voluntary agencies, resulting in a 70% to 80% positive rating for legislation. In addition, the Assembly, NILGA and most of the 26 district councils passed unanimous motions in support of the required legislative changes. We held follow-up meetings with the Equality Commission, the Children's Commissioner and Disability Action, resulting in agreed positions on the potential benefits of the Bill. All the autism charities in Northern Ireland, including Autism NI, PEAT, NAS, CEAT, SPEAC and Autism Initiatives, support the proposed legislation.

Precedent has already been established for the approach taken in the Bill. A single condition ASD focus already exists in the English Autism Act 2009. A government strategy for ASD exists in Wales and may soon be established in Scotland. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has, in the past, been amended to include specific conditions that sit more easily within the existing definition of disability than ASD, such as HIV, multiple sclerosis and cancer. In England, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has been replaced by the Equality Act 2010, and the definition of "disability" in that Act is currently subject to consultation. The Republic of Ireland's Disability Act 2005 includes definitions of sensory conditions and physical and mental health.

I hope that I have dealt adequately with the general principles of the Autism Bill. It is the majority position of the all-party Assembly group on autism that those general principles are sound and that they will lead, if enacted, to a huge improvement for people with autism in Northern Ireland. I commend the Bill to the House.

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

Autistic spectrum disorder is a lifelong developmental condition that affects those who live with it in different ways. Essentially, however, it affects the way in which a person

communicates with and relates to other people. It is a serious condition that has a significant impact not only on individuals but on their families and carers. I can speak on behalf of all members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety when I say that we welcome the seriousness with which the health and social care sector, other statutory agencies and, indeed, the Assembly are now treating autism and ASD.

The Committee has, since its inception, shown a close interest in the delivery of services to children and adults who live with autism. The Committee is committed to finding the best way to deliver those services and has examined the issue on a number of occasions. When the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety consulted on its autistic spectrum disorder strategic action plan in 2008, the Committee took evidence from the major autism charities and the independent review of autism services. Committee members visited Wales to study the workings of the Welsh Assembly Government's autistic spectrum disorder strategy, which has been in place since April 2008.

The Committee commended much in the Department's strategy but expressed concerns that the action plan sought to address services for people with autism solely from a health and social care perspective. At that time, the Committee emphasised the view that the provision of services for people with autism benefits greatly from being addressed on a cross-departmental basis. Although autism may be primarily a health issue, other Departments, including the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Justice, have a crucial role to play.

More recently, the Committee undertook prelegislative scrutiny of the Autism Bill. On 14 October 2010, the Committee was briefed by Mr Dominic Bradley, who was accompanied by a representative of the secretariat of the all-party Assembly group on autism. At that time, the Committee had before it Mr Bradley's draft Bill. An interesting discussion ensued, and the Committee debated and explored various issues with Mr Bradley, including the proposed cross-departmental strategy, the proposed changes to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the issue of resources. Following the discussion with Mr Bradley, the Committee held an evidence session on 2 December 2010 with

officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in order to gauge the Department's view on the Autism Bill. The Department had serious reservations about the Bill, which, no doubt, the Minister will elaborate on in detail today.

The Committee recognises that the Member who brought the Bill to the House and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are committed to improving services for those who live with autism. However, they disagree on how those services can be best delivered, whether through legislation or the departmental strategies that set out how each Department will provide the services for which it is responsible. There is a lack of convergence on the resource implications of the Bill. Pending a successful Second Stage and the referral of the Bill to the Health Committee, we will examine the clauses of the Bill and their implications in detail.

As with any Bill, the Committee will take evidence from key stakeholders who are involved in providing services to children and adults with autism and from organisations that may be affected by the Bill. The Committee recognises that complex issues are in play and that there are different opinions on the various aspects of the Bill. We will listen carefully to all views and come to our decisions on the basis of the evidence that is put before us.

For obvious reasons, I will take a neutral stance on any further discussions today. It is important that the Chairman of the Committee goes in with an open mind as we gather evidence on this important issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.25 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 14 have been withdrawn.

Rural Tourism

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress her Department has made in promoting rural tourism. (AQO 691/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend all the intrepid people from Fermanagh, Derry, Tyrone and Donegal for getting here today. I am looking for all the Members from East Belfast who are not here.

Mr McCarthy: What about the Ards Peninsula?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Good man, Kieran; you are never one to miss a chance.

Rural tourism is vital to the sustainability of rural communities, which is why the rural development programme (RDP) contains a measure to encourage tourism, with a budget of £12 million. Measure 3.3 of the RDP, which concerns the encouragement of tourism activities, specifically targets funding to tourism. Additionally, farming families wishing to diversify into self-catering and activity-based tourism can apply under measure 3.1, which relates to farm diversification.

I am pleased to report that, to date, almost £6 million has been approved for tourism projects, and that accounts for 50% of the funding that is available under the measure. By adding the further funding that is allocated under farm diversification, it becomes clear that the RDP is contributing significantly towards the development of rural tourism.

In addition, Forest Service officials have been involved in discussions with the Tourist Board and other stakeholders regarding the possible contribution from forests and how that can best be delivered. The Loughs Agency has also been involved in discussions. Its remit is for marine tourism and angling, much of which is rural in context and, therefore, assists in supporting rural tourism.

Mr Neeson: I am sure that there are many picture postcard scenes throughout rural parts of County Fermanagh today.

To what extent does the Department work with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Tourism Ireland on the development of rural tourism?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

My Department works with all agencies and partners that work in tourism. For example, the director of our rural development division, Keith Morrison, was working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) on its tourism strategy.

Although the programmes have been delivered through a bottom-up approach, obviously, we must look at it on a cross-cutting and strategic level. We work with NITB to ensure that, for example, our strategies are taken account of in its signature projects. We liaise closely with Tourism Ireland, and we have worked closely with NITB, for example, on a cycling trail in the Mourne, which, again, will help to encourage tourism potential there. NITB is a key partner in that. We work with whatever agency can help to add value to what we are doing and to encourage and maximise the benefits to rural communities.

Mr Gallagher: Bearing in mind that the Fáilte Ireland Irish homecoming initiative in 2012 will see hundreds of thousands of emigrants returning, many of them to rural communities in this country, does the Department have any plans that would enable rural communities here to benefit from that initiative?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

The work that is ongoing through the rural development programme has delivered a number of self-catering cottages, etc. The Member will be aware of those, given that quite a number of them are in the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The rural community there is investing in the tourism infrastructure,

which contributes to the amount of bed spaces that are available to people who visit those parts. That involves looking not just to 2012 but well into the future, to help to deliver a tourism product in areas that have traditionally been left behind.

Animal Feedstuffs

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she can give an assurance that sufficient measures are in place to ensure the traceability of animal feedstuffs so that the reputation of local beef and lamb products can be protected. (AQO 692/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The primary responsibility for feed traceability lies with the feed business operators (FBOs) at each stage of the feed chain. FBOs include importers, processors, hauliers and farmers. My inspectors check traceability of feedstuffs during audits and inspections of FBOs, and they require corrective action where there are shortcomings, with formal action being taken against persistent offenders. My departmental officials work closely with industry representatives and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to ensure that appropriate feed traceability controls are in place and are rigorously checked.

Miss McIlveen: Given the traceability of the premier product that we produce in Northern Ireland, is it not time that our producers received a premium return on that product? To that end, will the Minister inform the House about the work being carried out by her Department with the industry to brand our beef as is done in Scotland? When will we see Ulster beef and lamb on our supermarket shelves?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member has pointed out, food produced here is of a high quality, and its origin is a selling point that should be utilised by the industry. However, that is primarily a commercial matter, as state aid constraints preclude government from promoting local produce based on origin. I also point out that food labelling is a responsibility of the Food Standards Agency.

My Department assists producer groups by raising awareness of marketing opportunities available to them through supply chain initiatives. We also assist representative groups to deliver

the regional food programme, which is now in its fourth year and which recently opened a second call for applications this year. Over the past four years, the regional food programme provided funding of approximately £1 million for a range of initiatives, such as the food pavilion at the Balmoral Show and the Great Belfast Food Week. Locally, the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) is responsible for promoting red meat, and it has continued that promotion through 2010 with the farm quality assurance scheme and the website, lovebeefandlamb.com, as well as through school demonstrations and retail sampling. Invest NI is responsible for the international marketing of local produce, and its representatives and local companies have recently returned from an international food and red meat trade fair, SIAL 2010, which was held in France.

Finally, the Member may be aware of NI Good Food, a privately run organisation that has been established to provide a single promotional voice for the North's food and drink industry. Members include representative bodies from across the supply chain as well as individual private enterprises, and the organisation aims to enhance the reputation of local food and drink and to deliver positive messages to support the industry.

Mr Burns: The Member for Strangford raised an important issue, given the increase in trade across the island of Ireland. Does the Minister accept the importance of having regular discussions with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland on the traceability of animal feed components and livestock?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Absolutely. I have had frequent discussions on that and other issues with my counterpart in Dublin. The issue came up at the last North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) plenary meeting. I have said publicly on a number of occasions that the more we work together to market our produce to the rest of the world, rather than competing with each other, the more all our businesses can benefit from that approach. I have had a lot of discussions on the issue with my counterpart, Brendan Smith, and I have also met Bord Bia and others to discuss it.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Unfortunately, I have noticed recently that Bord Bia has brought forward proposals to

change its quality mark so that it can distinguish between products in the South and in the North. Has the Minister taken any steps to respond to that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Yes, I have. I am very aware of the issue, which NIFDA (Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association) raised directly with me. I followed that up with telephone calls and by writing to Brendan Smith to outline my concerns. As I said, the issue was raised at the NSMC meeting at the end of June. Following my intervention, Bord Bia agreed to engage with NIFDA to undertake further market research into the proposed quality logo, which is funded by industry contributions. Ultimately, labelling will be determined by two areas: legislation, which, in the North, is controlled by the FSA, and the marketplace. However, as I said, I have consistently stated that a joint approach to marketing products from the island of Ireland would benefit all producers on the island and is the most desirable way forward.

Agriculture and Forestry Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the EU agriculture and forestry processing and marketing grant scheme as part of the rural development programme. (AQO 693/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The EU agriculture and forestry processing and marketing grant (PMG) scheme closed for applications in March 2010 because of lack of budget availability. However, I was successful in a bid for additional funds for the scheme in the June monitoring round, and that has allowed officials to consider eight project applications for funding that had already been submitted prior to the March 2010 closure. A selection panel was held in October, and I am pleased to report that letters of offer to the value of £1.5 million to five successful companies were issued on 19 November 2010.

As part of the rural development programme, the PMG scheme has provided funding of £8.44 million to a total of 27 projects, including the most recent awards on 19 November. At a rate of funding of up to 40% of total expenditure, that £8.44 million of PMG financial assistance to agrifood processors provides support for investment by those local companies of

approximately £21 million. I will make a decision on the reopening of the scheme after the Executive have agreed departmental budgets for the next financial year.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her response. Why can the Department not have a single funding stream to help small food processors under the rural development programme?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The rural development programme has a range of measures that are designed to meet the needs of the rural community and economy, and each measure has clear objectives that are to be met. I know that there has been some concern among small food processors about funding streams, and my officials are now considering establishing a single point of contact in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to which all applications from food processors will be directed. That will allow applications from food processors to be considered for funding without the applicant's having to decide which axis or measure his or her project should be submitted to, and DARD staff will then signpost applications to the appropriate axis, depending on what percentage of annexe 1 raw material inputs into the project.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware that many people who apply for those grants will have to find match funding. Is she content that the banks and other financial organisations are doing everything that they can to try to help out farmers and individuals who are applying? What steps can she, through her Department, take to try to help with that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have met the banks on a number of occasions. I had all four banks in at a meeting, and I will meet them again, if necessary, to address the issue. I also meet the banks regularly at different events, and this issue comes up regularly. I encourage people who are interested in applying for funding from the rural development programme or for any kind of funding to shop around if their bank is not co-operating with them or is not able to lend. We are loyal to our banks. Indeed, I have been with the same bank since I was 17, and people do not tend to jump ship very often.

In what is a harsh economic climate, there are deadlines on spend, and we have to spend the money before the end of the financial year or it

is lost, not only to the person who is applying for the money but to the Department. It is important that they get the money spent. If money is available from government and the banks are not lending, my message to people is that they should shop around. They should go to another bank to see whether they can get a better deal from one of their bank's competitors.

Mrs D Kelly: It is good advice to shop around at all times. Does the Minister have any analysis from her Department on the co-operation that has been received from Planning Service relating to the delivery of the rural development programme? Quite often, planning approval is a prerequisite for grant approval.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: At the start of my time as Minister of Agriculture, I met the Minister of the Environment to discuss that issue. Where a project is dependent on grant aid of any type that has a deadline on funding spend, Planning Service will fast-track the application and get it through. If people are still finding problems with Planning Service, my advice is that they talk to their local MLA or councillor and emphasise the fact that their grant is dependent on its being spent by a certain time. The planning office will try to co-operate with them to get the planning approval through in time for the money to be spent.

Woodland Inventory

5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether a woodland inventory would help in monitoring progress on woodland creation and woodland loss.

(AQO 694/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: A woodland inventory will help in monitoring the extent of woodlands in the North of Ireland, including their creation and loss over time. In earlier replies on this subject, I indicated that Forest Service maintains an accurate inventory of the woodland that it manages and has comprehensive records of woodlands established under its grant schemes. I said that Forest Service would consider using other available woodland information to provide more comprehensive inventory data, allowing changes in woodland cover over the long term to be more fully captured. That work has commenced, and, in accordance with the Forestry Act 2010, it is my intention that it will lead to the eventual publication of a woodland

register, containing information on the location and size of woodlands and the types of trees contained in them. As envisaged in the 2010 Act, the register will be published at intervals not exceeding 10 years.

2.15 pm

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I understand that, so far, the Department has achieved only around 33% of its woodland creation target, with only around six months of the mandate left. Will the Minister advise the House of what steps she is taking to improve that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I covered that issue in the House recently. The Department has not met that target, which is disappointing. It is difficult to achieve it in the current climate. I accept that we probably will not meet the target that was envisaged at the beginning of the Programme for Government period.

New woodland grants are available. The difficulty with them is that the level of farm income that is required to obtain the grant is not the same as for other grants. Therefore, if someone applies for a grant under the rural development programme, for example, 15% of that person's income must come from farming, whereas, to access the woodland grant, 25% farming income is required. That creates a difference. It is a problem for people whose farming income is between 15% and 25%.

I have met private stakeholders from the forestry sector and a range of individuals to discuss the issue. I have raised it with the EU commissioner and his officials. To date, we have not been able to achieve a satisfactory outcome. I recognise that the issue is holding the Department back from achieving its targets. We will probably not meet them. That is regrettable. We are doing everything that we can to try to meet those targets. However, they are extremely challenging.

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

Does the Minister agree that it would be better if the new woodlands comprise mixed species of trees, rather than single species, to avoid unsightly clear fell at a later date?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Absolutely. The Member is from a rural constituency and knows how that can look.

The information that the Department will gather in the woodland register will identify the types of trees in woodland, whether they are conifer, broadleaf, mixed conifer/broadleaf, or short-rotation coppice, as a measure of woodland biodiversity. Some woodland is mixed, whereas other woodland comprises single species, such as spruce. Therefore, there are different needs. It is worth pointing out that in some woodland there may be a need to thin out and remove unsightly non-indigenous conifers, for example, so that more broadleaf trees can be planted in that space.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McElduff is not in his place to ask question 6.

Flood Prevention

7. **Mr Callaghan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the plans her Department has to clean watercourses and rivers that have a history of flooding.

(AQO 696/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Rivers Agency conducts a rolling programme of cyclical inspection and carries out maintenance as required to designated watercourses in the North of Ireland. Details of maintenance work that is planned as a result of the inspections are published in the annual watercourse maintenance programme on the Rivers Agency website.

Rivers Agency steps up monitoring and inspection at high-risk locations with a history of flooding in advance of very heavy rainfall and clears them, as necessary, to ensure free flow and to alleviate the flooding risk. Following any significant flooding event, reaches of watercourses that are known to have been affected are inspected. Any significant blockages to their free flow are removed.

I will take this opportunity to remind the public that dumping material in or near a river can easily lead to blockages and subsequent flooding. Hedge and tree cuttings are major culprits because they can wash down and block grilles. Items of furniture should be disposed of properly, at council waste sites. Many councils operate a free collection service for disposal of bigger items. I do not need to say that shopping trolleys should not be disposed of in the Foyle either.

Mr Callaghan: I concur with the Minister's remark about not putting trolleys into the Foyle.

Does she consider that stringent drainage restrictions in areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) have caused some preventable flooding in the past? Will she consider a means by which to lessen that problem in the future?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Rivers Agency must consider all issues that may impact on its work. Some of those drainage schemes or maintenance works may be in ASSIs or special environmental categories.

Some of our elected representatives want Rivers Agency to scope all rivers and to remove all foliage and trees from their banks. However, that foliage is useful, and the fact that branches and trees hang into the river does not, in itself, impact on future flooding.

Rivers Agency does everything that it can to maintain the rivers, but there is somewhat of a dependency on it. Riparian landowners and those who have watercourses on their land also have a responsibility to keep waterways clear, and it is not always down to what Rivers Agency is or is not doing. Indeed, when the flooding occurred in Fermanagh last year, Rivers Agency went way over and above what it was statutorily required to do to help people out during a very difficult time.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister pay particular attention to the designation of urban streams when it comes to the clearing of debris and the impact that the non-clearance of debris has on those streams? When streams are not designated, they tend to accumulate rubbish, and that adds to the flooding problems in some parts of our cities and towns.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I refer the Member back to my original answer. People also need to be more careful about what they put in urban streams, and our elected representatives need to send out that message. People might think that because a river has a six-foot-high bank, it will make no difference if rubbish is dumped in it, but when the water levels rise, the water lifts debris from the banks, and it can block grilles. A grille may be fine when inspected on a Monday, but if there is heavy rain that night or the following day, that grille can become blocked within hours. Rivers Agency does what it can to keep an eye on the grilles on an ongoing basis and employs cyclical maintenance to keep them clear. However, we need people to work with us

and not to put debris into rivers and streams. They may feel that that debris is fairly harmless, but as it accumulates and goes downstream, it can have a major impact and can lead to people's homes and businesses being flooded.

Mr Girvan: I represent an area through which the Sixmilewater flows, and a number of the tributaries that feed into that river are not designated. There is a request for some of those to be upgraded, in particular the Doagh River, which flooded last year and caused extensive damage to local businesses and properties.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question please.

Mr Girvan: Is it possible that some of those rivers could be taken under the Department's control and be designated?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The decision to designate lies with the Drainage Council. A number of elected representatives sit on that council, and if stretches of river are causing problems, Members should write to the Drainage Council to encourage it to inspect them. The Department does not have the ability to designate or undesignate watercourses.

Fishing

8. **Mr Bell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the current pressures on our fishing industry. (AQO 697/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The most immediate pressure facing the fishing industry is the European Commission's proposals for 2011 fishing opportunities, and radical changes are proposed for the management of the prawn quota. In addition to moving to lower maximum sustainable yield quotas, it is proposed that the large area 7 quota should be split into smaller sea-area units. Although the quota would be cut across all the units by 17 %, the Irish Sea units will fare better, and our fleet would suffer a cut in quota of only 6%. However, if that functional unit management proposal is rejected, the Commission may try to impose a cut of 17% on all fleets.

The Commission has also proposed a 50% reduction in the quota for cod and a 15% reduction in the quota for Irish Sea haddock, combined with a likely further reduction in

fishing time of 25%. Prospects for the Irish Sea herring fishery remain good. However, I am annoyed that, despite sound scientific evidence of a healthy stock, the Commission has refused to propose an increased quota, even though that stock satisfies the Commission's criteria for an increase.

The Commission's proposals for 2011 are the latest in a line of similar proposals, and, in recognition of their impact on the fishing industry, the Fisheries Forum was established. Earlier this year, it reported back to me and highlighted various pressures, including the lack of profitability in the fleet, the need for restructuring and the need to consider a decommissioning scheme. My Department has produced an action plan to deliver the forum's recommendations. We look forward to working with it during 2011 to implement those recommendations.

Mr Bell: I thank the Minister for being across the detail on the pressures that our fishing fleet is undergoing. However, can she share the pain of many fishing families that I represent in Portavogie, whose livelihoods will be decimated if those quotas and cuts go ahead? Is it not unacceptable that they are not allowed to fish when they have a healthy stock?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I agree with the Member, and I feel his pain. This is one of the hardest aspects of my job, because, where there are other areas outside your control, this one is particularly harsh for the fishing industry. When I talk about the industry, I do not mean just the fleet and the people who catch fish. The processing sector is also under quite a bit of pressure, and, obviously, the smaller the quota, the fewer fish are landed, and the less raw material there is for them to process.

I am going to Brussels on Monday and Tuesday. I expect that to be the toughest negotiation yet. I met Maria Damanaki, the Fisheries Commissioner, on Tuesday of last week, and impressed on her the difficulties and challenges that all our fishing communities face in light of those restrictions. It really is a very difficult situation for all concerned.

We will go out and do our absolute best. I will be meeting the industry over the coming days, and we will be going in there and fighting hard. However, it is like any negotiation: you get so far where you can get people over the line, and

then that is it, it is over, and where you are on that scale when the negotiation closes is where you will end up. However, I will do everything in my power to come back with as good a deal as I can for our industry.

Mr McCarthy: A very depressing response from the Minister, as was the contribution from her Department to the Agriculture Committee recently. I wish the Minister well in Brussels. At least there is a local Minister going. When we had direct rule, the guy did not even bother to go.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr McCarthy: So, we wish you all the very best, and please bring good news back to Portavogie and Ardglass. My question is: your Department had an opportunity to help the cockle fishermen in Belfast Lough. As I understand it, the Commission did not have any input into your Department saying no.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please? Otherwise I will move on.

Mr McCarthy: Your Department did not allow fishermen to get in on that lucrative business in Belfast Lough.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have looked at that issue very carefully over the past number of weeks, and I understand where the Member is coming from. Further scientific work needs to be carried out on the cockle fishery in Belfast Lough. We are hoping that we can open that fishery next year, but it will be subject to our own scientific evidence. Again, we cannot have a situation of enabling people to fish a stock that we do not know for a fact is sustainable, thereby, perhaps, removing that resource from the lough.

The Member will also understand that I am not here to depress him. However, I am here to be honest with the House, and to paint a realistic picture of what is happening. Members need to understand, too, that there are environmental concerns with any marine effort, and those have to be taken into consideration.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her detailed reply. I am probably one of the most pro-European Members of the House. However, it is very depressing to hear that the Commission is now asking for further reductions in quota, particularly when the scientific evidence indicates an increase in stocks. Is it not time for the Minister to exercise perhaps more influence by

using the European Parliament to put pressure on the Commission to try to reverse the ridiculous situation of putting Northern Irish fishermen out of work?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will just correct the Member's question, because he said that I was going to ask the Commission. You do not get to ask the Commission; they tell you what the quotas will be. If it was a matter of asking, I am more than capable of doing that.

However, the main thrust of his question was around our MEPs. I work very closely with all three of our MEPs. They are all very supportive on this issue. They do everything that they can to work with us and to help us, and they recognise the challenges that we face. I honestly cannot say anything about any of our MEPs and the effort that they are putting into the industry. This is very much a combined effort, and I appreciate the help and support that I get from the three MEPs on this and many other issues.

2.30 pm

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Public Sector Jobs

2. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he remains committed to his predecessor's policy on the decentralisation of public sector jobs within his remit.

(AQO 705/11)

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I thank the Member for her question. I am committed to decentralisation. The Department already has 27% of its staff outside greater Belfast. Organisations such as the Housing Executive are, by their nature, located far and wide across the country. The Bain proposals may have been suspended or put in doubt, but I will continue to try to identify opportunities to decentralise services. The Charity Commission's head office is a case in point. My predecessor committed to a location outside Belfast, and I remain committed to that outcome.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's continued commitment to decentralisation. Will he offer

some assurance that, in the decentralisation plans, consideration will be given to the needs of employees in relation to their family commitments, and, indeed, to wider environmental issues such as the reduction of the carbon footprint in dealing with travel arrangements?

The Minister for Social Development: I would like to give that commitment. In making decisions about decentralisation of services, there are a number of criteria such as efficient and effective use of resources, accessibility to the general population, and locating services in areas of need and neighbourhood renewal that would incorporate and extend to the two issues identified by the Member. The range of all those criteria is what should inform me or any other Minister when making decisions about decentralisation.

Mr K Robinson: I am reassured by the Minister's reply to Mrs Kelly. I remind him that East Antrim currently and historically has the lowest number of public sector jobs of any of the 18 constituencies. Given the issues that Mrs Kelly highlighted, will the Minister seriously consider the relocation of jobs to the East Antrim constituency?

The Minister for Social Development: I will consider the decentralisation of jobs to any constituency that is under-represented, although I will give two health warnings. First, given the capital and revenue budget that we may face in the near future — in fact, the certainty that we will face reductions — opportunities to decentralise may be fewer. That said, it is my view that the current economic conditions create opportunities for us to do things differently. I have just come back from a meeting where I spoke about the need for organisations to consider sharing services, collaborating better, and even merging. In the financial environment that we are about to face, is there not now an opportunity to look again at the potential to decentralise? By saving money, we may also be able to protect jobs.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's commitment to decentralisation. I take the point that was made by the honourable Member for East Antrim. I take the view that North Antrim — particularly places like Ballymoney and Ballycastle — has fewer public sector jobs. Will the Minister ensure that, in the decentralisation process and in the reorganisation of existing offices under his control, he will not take jobs

away from towns such as Ballymoney, where that has already happened, and Ballycastle and concentrate them in bigger conurbations in other constituencies?

The Minister for Social Development: I do not want to build up false hopes that there is a magic wand that can decentralise thousands of jobs. That would be misleading the House. That said, beyond the issue of the Charity Commission, I have asked officials to come back to me with a scoping exercise to consider where opportunities may or may not exist. I do not want to exaggerate the potential, but I certainly want to identify where the potential for decentralisation might be, mindful of the health warnings that I have just laid down.

The real issue, though, when it comes to the Department for Social Development (DSD) services, is not whether we will be able to maintain services in local communities but whether, as part of the Budget outcomes, the Government and the Executive decide that the spread of social security offices that we have across Northern Ireland are a vital public service — especially in a time of recession with 80,000, 90,000 or 100,000 people unemployed, where social security offices have a much greater customer demand — and protect those front line services. As a consequence of that, the very point that Mr Storey makes will be satisfied, local jobs in local areas will be protected and vital local services will be provided to many people in need.

Winter Fuel Payment

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the winter fuel payment for 2010-11. (AQO 706/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question, which is obviously timely.

I confirm that winter fuel payments are an automatic entitlement for people on certain qualifying benefits. As everyone over 65 is in receipt of the pension, they are entitled to a payment. It is only men aged between 60 and 65 who are not on a qualifying benefit who have to apply for it. I encourage that category of person to make sure that they apply before the end of March next year. As a consequence of that, they will receive the payment.

In respect of all those who are currently entitled — and that includes everyone who received the payment last year — all those payments are being issued at the moment and should be received before Christmas.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware that for some reason or other a lot of people who are entitled to the winter fuel payment have not as yet received it. That is particularly relevant during this spell of cold weather. If I were Chairman of the Social Development Committee, I might ask the Minister to consider his position, but I am not, so I do not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr McCarthy: What compensation, if any, will the Minister give to those people who are sitting freezing in their homes because of some mess-up in some office somewhere?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. We must be careful to differentiate the winter fuel payment, which is a payment of £250 for those who qualify over the age of 60 and £400 to those over the age of 80. That payment is currently being processed.

I presume that the Member refers to the cold weather payment, which is a £25 one-off payment made during a seven-day period when the temperature is zero or below. Because of the failure of a processing centre in England to enter the proper computer code, payments to about 14,000 people who are covered by the Katesbridge weather station will not now be issued until 7 or 8 December.

I completely agree with the Member. I am fuming that vulnerable people, during this cold snap, have not received their £25. That issue is currently being rectified. I have been reassured by the authorities in London that a further system has been put in place to ensure that, in the future, any such wrong code will not be entered.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

As the Minister has said, there have been delays in the issue of cold weather payments. That is blamed on IT failure. Will the Minister assure us that this will be rectified and, in the future, will not happen? As the Minister knows, until last year, cold weather payments had not been issued since 2004. It is not as though the

Department has not had enough time to prepare for these eventualities.

The Minister for Social Development:

The Department has prepared for these eventualities, so much so that, in the summer, I authorised an extension of the number of weather stations in Northern Ireland from five to seven. In an effort to ensure that those who are entitled receive cold weather payments, I obtained a better spread of evidence and information.

Save my going to the computer centre in England and entering the computer code myself, I cannot personally give that guarantee. However, I have been reassured that a further system of checks has been put in place to ensure that the correct computer codes are entered into the relevant IT system in future, so that the error that has affected around 13,700 people in the Katesbridge weather station area over the past couple of weeks does not happen again. That error should never have arisen. I regret that and I am fuming that it happened but, unfortunately, it was beyond my control. Nevertheless, we have demonstrated that, except for that one occasion, all the relevant people in six of the seven areas in the North have received at least one, and, in some cases, more than one cold weather payment. Indeed, over the next number of days, I anticipate that there will be announcements about further cold weather payments.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware that I wrote to him recently about cold weather payments. Many people in my constituency are concerned that the areas in which they live are not considered to have experienced freezing conditions for seven continuous days. Is the Minister content that the facilities used to measure cold spells in each constituency can do that to the proper standard?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question, which is a fair one. He asked whether I am satisfied that the way in which the weather stations are spread out ensures that all those who are entitled to payments receive them. Mr McCrea's constituency colleague Mr McGlone raised that very point with me yesterday and mentioned, in particular, the people living in and around the Sperrin Mountains. I am sure that Mr McCrea is also referring to that. As a consequence, I brought in the relevant officials at lunchtime

today to look at the spread of weather stations on the Northern Ireland map to find out whether there is a gap in weather coverage that could affect cold weather payments in any areas beyond and including the Sperrins. I am actively looking at that matter, and I will report back to Mr McCrea and Mr McGlone in due course.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell the House what more DSD and others can do to alleviate fuel poverty?

The Minister for Social Development: No later than early in the new year, but perhaps prior to that, I will make some further announcements about addressing fuel poverty in times of need. We have an obligation to address that matter more generally. I will provide the Member with some shape to my thinking. On my behalf and that of the Executive, my permanent secretary is chairing a high-level team that is looking at whether there is potential to roll out the green new deal, which would make 100,000 homes energy efficient within three years and provide an employment bounce for 2,300 or 2,400 people.

In the very near future, I hope, for the first time, to make a ministerial announcement about how we can try to deal with fuel costs. I met the gas and electricity companies and the oil distributors last week to determine what can be done through energy brokering to try to drive down costs. It should be remembered that the housing association and Housing Executive sector accounts for 120,000 houses in Northern Ireland. That should be able to produce buy-in power to drive down costs and to reduce fuel poverty. I am looking at all those issues.

However, I wish to make this point: I am deeply unhappy that, to date, organisations such as BP, which imports 70% of the oil that 70% of the households in Northern Ireland use for heating, have not found the time or the space to meet me so that I can interrogate and question them about their obligations to manage fuel prices in a way that reduces fuel poverty.

2.45 pm

Benefits

4. Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on his recent discussions with the Minister for Welfare Reform on the proposed changes to benefit entitlement.
(AQO 707/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I met the Welfare Reform Minister, Lord Freud, in London last Monday, and I updated the Committee for Social Development on Thursday about the broad nature of those conversations. To collapse it all down, I will make two points. First, it has been my sense that London welfare reform Ministers want to get universal credit out the door, and they are in negotiations with Treasury; therefore, they had not fully applied their minds to the impact of benefit changes in the devolved jurisdictions, particularly in Northern Ireland.

The purpose of the meeting with Lord Freud was to impress that upon him again. I think that he may be taking on board the historical and current levels of deprivation in Northern Ireland, the legacy of conflict, the risk of instability, the fact that we are still in recession, that housing prices are still going down, and that impact of the economic situation in Dublin on Northern Ireland has yet to be fully worked through. All those factors and many others mean that Northern Ireland is a particular case that requires particular remedies when it comes to benefit and welfare changes. I continue to impress that argument on Lord Freud, and I will not give up so doing.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for the detail of that answer. I and other MLAs would be critical if the Minister were not making those strenuous efforts on behalf of the vulnerable people in our society. He referred to the fact that he believes that Lord Freud is now starting to listen to the arguments. Will the Minister give us an indication of when he expects to see the substance of that response as the outcome of his efforts to date?

The Minister for Social Development: I do not want to go into the full detail of the content of the conversation with Lord Freud, but I indicated to the Committee, and I will confirm to the House, that there are a number of streams that I am trying to pursue. First, we are the only devolved arrangement that has legal and legislative responsibility to pass laws when it comes to welfare. If I can prevail over London to give legislative flexibility about how we legislate for welfare and welfare reform, it will create opportunities for us to do things differently.

Secondly, as a recent report from Professor Harrington indicated in respect of Britain and the migration of incapacity benefit claimants

to employment and support allowance (ESA), if one builds in operational flexibilities around how the law is then applied, including in respect of guidance given to people who make assessments in the Social Security Agency on people's entitlement, one can begin to model welfare and welfare delivery in a way that reflects our particular circumstances.

Thirdly, I am not going to be behind the door on this matter. I said to Lord Freud that in the final analysis, whatever about legal and operational flexibility, in my view, the conditions in the North, the particular circumstances that we face and the impact of need and disadvantage on many people require financial intervention from London and from the Executive. That is why, last week, I passed to the Executive a remedies paper that outlined to the Executive interventions over the next four years funded at the Executive table in order to mitigate the worst excesses of welfare reform and cuts that have been visited on too many people in our community.

Mrs M Bradley: Will you bring your proposals for mitigating some of the welfare reform issues to your colleagues in the Executive Committee?

The Minister for Social Development: As I indicated last week, I forwarded what I call a remedies paper to my Executive colleagues. It scoped out general and particular opportunities where the Executive could intervene financially to ease the burden that is being created on too many people. However, in my view, the moneys that we are talking about are of such a scale that they are beyond the ability of the DSD alone to fund. Therefore, it will require an Executive decision to fund. In my view, spending £20 million a year easing the burden of people in need, rather than spending £20 million a year on a community renewal fund that has been developed over the heads of Government and the community, is a much better and wise investment by the Government.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister appreciate the fears of so many people who have serious disabilities? They are frightened about what Christmas will bring for them. Some of them are in wheelchairs. Does he accept the fact that the media present those people as, in some way, claiming benefits to which they should not be entitled and that genuine claimants, who are living with real disability and facing an uncertain Christmas, are frightened and concerned,

because they do not know what they will be able to pay next year? The media are almost saying that those people should not have been paid benefits in the first place.

The Minister for Social Development: I concur with that sentiment. Yesterday on 'Talkback', Monica Wilson from Disability Action outlined how she thought that proposals from London, including the disability living allowance (DLA) review, were demoralising for people who, in many ways, are already in need and disadvantage and under fear and uncertainty. I concur with her, as will the Member. The new wave of reform will demoralise people and create the concern that the Member identified: namely that some in the media will demonise people who are legitimately on benefits.

London has to face up to the fact that, for example, 50,000 people in Northern Ireland receive DLA. For reasons substantially beyond people's control, given their life experiences and the legacy of conflict, they suffer from mental incapacity or trauma of one sort or another. That is not a made-up figure or evidence of people abusing the system; those people are in substantial need. Those circumstances need to be recognised when it comes to DLA and other reforms being worked through.

Ms Lo: I appreciate the fact that the Minister is going to and from Westminster to speak on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. However, he has been going to Westminster for some time and has been there on several occasions. As the Member who spoke previously said, I do not want to raise false expectations for people. Will the Minister outline the benefits on which he is seeking flexibility, and when we will hear about them?

The Minister for Social Development: I want to say a number of things in relation to that question. First, at least I continue to have a conversation with London. In some other places, it seems that the conversation has gone quiet. At least Lord Freud, to be fair to him, continues to have a conversation with me, and it is clear that that conversation will continue. Secondly, some of the benefit changes and cuts will impact very quickly, but it is planned that some of them will not be imposed until 2013 or 2014. Universal credits and DLA reform, for example, are within that timescale. I hope that the future Minister for Social Development, whoever that might be, will continue to travel to London to

put the case of Northern Ireland's particular circumstances, because a case will have to be made, year in, year out, as welfare reform proposals evolve, develop and are legislated for. It is not a matter that will be resolved by me in the next number of weeks; it is a matter that will have to be addressed by successive Ministers and Governments in Northern Ireland over the longer term.

I will give one example of what will happen in the immediate future. Lord Freud agreed with me that officials in my Department and in the department for Work and Pensions would begin to work together through the particular and general impact of the current welfare changes and cuts in Northern Ireland. Lord Freud has had experience of Northern Ireland during the years of conflict, and he has made assessments in that regard on how it might apply to the Middle East. I have a sense that he is beginning to apply his mind to our circumstances, and in that space there may be an opportunity to answer Ms Lo's question positively.

Benefits

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Social Development how many benefits are administered by the Social Security Agency.
(AQO 708/11)

The Minister for Social Development: Eighteen benefits are administered by the Social Security Agency.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister for his very short answer. Does he acknowledge that the agency administers too many benefits and that the system is not user-friendly and is unnecessarily complicated?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. As I keep saying, I am a believer in reform. Northern Ireland has done reform well, albeit slowly, over the past 40 years. The proof is in this Chamber, in policing, in employment, in equality and in housing. There is much reform that we need to do. I am not opposed to reform. I believe in reform in a positive image. Therefore, I will support anything that may simplify the benefits system or may help people who are capable of work to get into work. However, the problem is that much of what the Government are doing in London is cuts disguised as reform, which I do not support. In our conditions in Northern Ireland,

which I just outlined, the impact on those in need and disadvantage will be disproportionate and will go very deep. Although I support reform, including welfare reform, I do not support how London is pursuing it. I am very concerned that the scale of what is proposed — not a week passes without a welfare reform initiative — will lead to the overload of the system whereby the ambition of some in London to reform will be too big, too far, too fast and too deep, with consequences for those who are on benefits in Northern Ireland.

Mr Craig: Does the Minister agree that there is an over-complication of not only the number of benefits but the forms that need to be filled in? Of the tens of thousands of payments that were investigated by his Department, I think that something like 60% had to be moved upwards due to mistakes by the applicants and some staff in his Department.

The Minister for Social Development: I repeat that initiatives that can simplify welfare application and the management of welfare are useful. However, we must be careful to differentiate between simplification and an attempt to reduce the welfare platform. If it is simplification, we could probably concur. However, if it is changing processes to reduce the welfare platform to bring about cuts that impact adversely on the lives of our communities and citizens, we need to be very mindful and vigilant not to go down that road.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Trevor Lunn is not in his place to ask question 6, and Mr Basil McCrea is not in his place to ask question 7.

Housing: Private Sector Grants

8. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Social Development what budget was available for private sector grants in the Newry area in the last financial year and how much of that budget was spent.
(AQO 711/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I confirm that, in the 2009-2010 year, the Newry grants office budget for private sector grants was £4.19 million. Actual expenditure was £4.65 million, which is 11.1% greater than the original figure.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he continue with routine maintenance in the Newry area, or does he propose to withdraw any funding?

The Minister for Social Development: I have no proposals to withdraw any funding from any area, including Newry. The maintenance budget going forward will be subject to the Budget negotiations. In the fullness of time, we will see what that does or does not reveal. I am committed to maintenance budgets in the Housing Executive. I am not committed to multi-element improvements when it comes to housing stock because the quality of our public housing in the Housing Executive is of such a standard that multi-element schemes are not the way to go. However, single-element schemes across a range of maintenance categories will be part of the budget going forward, subject to whatever that budget may be.

3.00 pm

Private Members' Business

Autism Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Autism Bill [NIA 2/10] be agreed. — [Mr D Bradley.]

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the principles set out in the Bill and declare an interest as a member of the all-party Assembly group on disability. In moving the Second Stage, Dominic Bradley set out the general principles that are to be achieved through the Bill. I want to pick up and expand on a few of those points, particularly about autism, autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and Asperger's syndrome and their effects and why early intervention is important. I will pick up on the prevalence of the conditions and on the equality agenda.

Autism is a neural development disability that affects the areas of the brain responsible for social communication, imagination and social interaction. Individuals with autism will have problems in one, two or all three areas. Around 25% of people with ASD will have an accompanying learning disability. Of those with autism, 75% have an IQ level of more than 70.

Asperger's syndrome is autism without a learning disability. Individuals with Asperger's syndrome may have average or above-average intelligence and may not have the language or speech problems of a person with autism. However, they may have language or communication problems and co-ordination and movement problems, as well as social difficulties, particularly in comprehending social rules in relationships and situations. That predisposes people with Asperger's syndrome to anxiety and stress conditions that may require intervention. Mental health services lack the expertise and confidence to provide an adequate and appropriate service for people with ASD. Dominic Bradley referred to statistics that reflect the association between mental health and autism, and I think that that should be high on our agenda.

Dominic touched on prevalence rates, and it is startling that 20,000 children and adults have autism. Five thousand of the children are of

school age. Each year, 300 children who will later be diagnosed with ASD are born. The most startling statistic is that the number of children with ASD has increased by 500% over the past seven years. People often say that the disability is rare: it is not. It is one of the fastest growing developmental disabilities, and a look at the statistics makes that clear. Four times more males than females are affected by autism, and 25% of people with ASD have a learning disability. Of those with ASD, approximately 75% fall outside the current Department of Health programme of care model.

There is no known cure for autism, but, with correct intervention and support, individuals can have meaningful levels of independence in their life, something that is at the heart of the legislation being debated. Research suggests that there is no single cause of autism but there is a physical problem that affects the parts of the brain that integrate language and information processed from the senses. Autism has a physical — not emotional — origin, and evidence regarding a genetic link to ASD is increasing. There is an ongoing debate about the impact of environmental factors. Some sources contend that the rapidly growing prevalence that we see today cannot be due totally to better detection rates. There must be other factors.

Individuals with ASD have problems in three main areas, the first of which is social interaction. For example, they may not want to socialise or be with other people, or they may behave socially inappropriately — “naive” may be another way to look at it. They have difficulty understanding social rules, and that often brings people with ASD into conflict with the public and the justice system. Yesterday, in the debate on early intervention, all Members agreed that, often, the justice system deals with people who would not be there, had there been proper intervention at an early stage in their life.

The second area is social communication. Some individuals may never speak any meaningful language, or they may have a functional language, with no interest in making small talk. Some may engage in one-sided interactions, such as talking for long periods about a subject of special interest to them, with no awareness of the needs of the listener.

Imagination is the third area in which ASD prevails. Often, children at the severe end of

the spectrum will not play in a meaningful and imaginative way. They may prefer to line up their toys according to size or colour. Such individuals may not be able to imagine an alternative. They have little tolerance for unexpected changes in any areas of their life and may be driven to follow particular routines and be unable to accept change or be flexible in their day-to-day life.

A person with autism will also experience sensory problems with certain noises or a need for deep pressure. Individuals may also have problems filtering out information; for example, a child may not be able to ignore certain sounds or stimuli in the environment that they are in. Individuals may also have a problem with organisation; for example, the child may be highly intelligent but, regardless of their ability, may find it very difficult to sequence putting on their clothes. That can seem unusual to others who do not understand the condition and are not properly prepared for dealing with such children, especially schools, teachers and support workers in general.

ASD affects the lives of people of all ages and levels of ability. Popular culture often presents the perception that ASD is a condition of childhood: that is not the case. However, it is often diagnosed in childhood and is best diagnosed by a multidisciplinary team that assesses the child in a variety of settings, for example, in the home, school and clinic. Each professional will contribute to the overall diagnosis, from which a treatment plan will be developed. The team is likely to be made up of a paediatrician, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist, a clinical psychologist and sometimes a specialist social worker. A child psychiatrist can also often be in attendance. If symptoms are picked up on at school by a teacher or classroom assistant, the child may be referred for an assessment by an educational psychologist.

When queries are first raised about a child's difficulty in social communication, even before diagnosis, it is important that advice is sought. The months that parents spend waiting for a diagnosis can be put to good use, reading about and becoming familiar with holistic intervention programmes. I pay tribute to the many support organisations, such as Autism NI, Parents' Education as Autism Therapists, the Centre for Early Autism Treatment, Autism Initiatives and the National Autistic Society. There are so many groups. They do fantastic work and

support parents who find themselves in a difficult situation when they have recently had a diagnosis and are not sure where to turn.

The other particularly difficult issue for those who have ASD is managing transitions. Routine and predictability are very important to people with ASD, and it can be difficult to interpret and make sense of social rules and situations. It is vital that services plan and work together to smooth the child's life transitions from preschool, along their school life and into lifelong learning. Again, I point to the voluntary sector, which has worked tirelessly with parents and those on the autistic spectrum to support them and help them through those situations.

Issues of equality have been raised around autism and autism legislation as regards the creation of a hierarchy of disability and the whole equality agenda. I do not believe that that is what we are doing through this legislation. ASD is not recognised as a social and communicative disability under the current Disability Discrimination Act. We looked to other examples, and, in England, the Government are repealing the Disability Discrimination Act and replacing it or consulting on replacing it with the Equality Act 2010. The definition of disability that will be contained in that legislation is out for consultation, and we have a real chance here today to address the current inequality around the fact that autism is not recognised. The Disability Discrimination Act refers to physical and mental disability but not explicitly to communication and social disability. This is our opportunity to address that inequality and to make it right for all who are on the autistic spectrum.

There have been many developments in autism over the past years, none less than the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's action plan, as well as the work of the community and voluntary sector in supporting parents and those on the spectrum. There has been an increase in funding from the Department of Health, and I fully recognise that. I also welcome the development of the action plan and the new network where parents are very much involved in progressing that plan.

Today's debate should not be a battle. We all want the same outcome. We all want to improve the lives of people with autism. That needs to be at the core of everything that we do today. Let us build on the good work that has

happened. This legislation is not taking away from that; it is enhancing it and calling for more cross-departmental working.

Last but not least, I commend the work of parents. I have met many parents since my election to this Assembly — parents who make sure that we, as MLAs, are very much aware of the effects of autism on the individual and on the entire family circle.

With this legislation, we have a real opportunity to change for the better the lives of those on the autistic spectrum. I look forward to Committee Stage, and I know that the National Autistic Society has suggested an amendment requiring more parental consultation in the strategy that we take forward. I would not dispute that for a moment; it would be very positive. Therefore, I look forward to Committee Stage and to ensuring that, collectively, we improve the lives of those on the autistic spectrum.

Mr Gardiner: I would willingly support any measure that made the early diagnosis and treatment of autism possible. Nevertheless, we need to see this measure in context. On 29 November, the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, announced an additional £100,000 of funding for autism services in Northern Ireland. That happened even though he was already involved in two major budgetary battles with the Finance Minister. One of those battles related to local budgetary cuts of £370 million. Members will recall that the Health Minister had to find £113 million of that. The other battle was, of course, over the comprehensive spending review cuts. The extra funding that the Minister announced for autism will be used to develop specialist adult autism diagnostic services. The new money was in addition to the extra investment of £1.54 million in autism services over 2009-2011, bringing the recurrent total new investment to £1.64 million from April 2011.

At the same time that the Minister announced that extra funding, he gave a guarantee that autism would be prioritised across all Departments. The Minister also drew attention to the fact that waiting times for an autism referral were reducing and that he was determined that no child should have to wait longer than the current 13-week target for diagnostic assessment. The Minister said that he believed that he already possessed all the legislative authority he needed to make all necessary improvements in autism services. He was able to say that

because he controls social care as well as healthcare — a combination of responsibilities that, in the United Kingdom, is unique to Northern Ireland.

One thing that we must guard against is overlegislation. The fact that we can legislate does not mean that, on every occasion, we should legislate. Often, legislation imposes new and unavoidable costs on government, and, of course, this is a time when we could do without additional costs. If the Minister believes that he already possesses the relevant authority to deliver, we need to ask whether new legislation is justified.

3.15 pm

Mr McCarthy: The answer to that question is most definitely yes.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the Bill and congratulate everyone involved in getting us to where we are today. It has been an uphill battle. However, when something is right and people have fight in their bellies, they do not lie down; they battle their way through many obstacles and work with others, as far as possible, to arrive at a consensus, all to the benefit, in this instance, of children and adults who have autism.

I am delighted to be the Alliance Party's representative on the all-party group on autism, and I pay tribute to its chairman, Mr Dominic Bradley, who has played a pivotal role, along with others, in getting the Autism Bill to its Second Stage in the Assembly today. I also pay tribute to all the voluntary groups throughout Northern Ireland that have worked with elected Members to convince us all of the need for an Autism Bill, despite the reservations that have been expressed in some quarters.

It is unfortunate that Northern Ireland is experiencing an increase in the incidence of autism among youngsters who, inevitably, will grow to become adults and seniors. The Assembly must accept what is happening and make the necessary arrangements to ensure that everyone with autism has exactly the same rights and expectations as everyone else. It is unfortunate that, more often than not, people with autism and their parents and guardians have to fight for everything when it comes to health, education, social development and so on. Why should that happen? Like the rest of us, people with autism have normal everyday

needs and ambitions. That is why we need an Autism Bill, so that, as a statutory requirement, everyone will receive their entitlement. It is outrageous that, at present, parents and guardians, with so much caring and watching to do, have to spend much valuable time getting what is theirs simply as of right. I speak with the knowledge of having been through something similar.

The Autism Bill has the support of the vast majority of groups engaged in promoting the wishes and needs of the ASD voluntary sector. The strategic action plan put forward by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety falls far short of what is required. The Autism Bill will direct the formation of a cross-departmental approach to ASD by requiring the development of a cross-departmental strategy for autism.

The evidence presented in the Assembly all-party group on autism's briefing paper was overwhelmingly in favour of progressing with the Bill. As has already been said, a petition of support, signed by thousands of campaigners, was presented to all the political parties and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. All 26 local councils, as far as I know, supported positive motions in favour of an Autism Bill. Most of the political parties have signed up to support the Bill. Many families, who are at the coalface of the autism spectrum, have supported the Bill. Indeed, in preparation for next year's Assembly elections, parties are registering ASD as a priority. I say loud and clear today that the Alliance Party is 100% behind the need for an Autism Bill without delay. We will have that in our party manifesto and will work tirelessly in the new mandate to see that the Bill is brought to fruition. I hope that other parties will do the same.

When the Assembly signs off on this important Bill, the people most in need of legislation will see a lifelong strategy adopted that places the welfare of people with autism and their families at its centre. The Autism Bill will provide for an Executive-sponsored ASD awareness campaign that will include a first awareness level of training for senior civil servants. All Departments will have to address the impact of legislative change on their policies, practices and provision. The Bill will have a real and positive effect on families. It will assure parents and guardians that, at last, the Executive recognise the lifelong and whole-life reality of

ASD; that ASD is a shared responsibility in our community; that duplication and confusion can be addressed; and that transactions that are distressing for individuals with autism can be planned and resourced.

We all want a better life for all our constituents, and the Autism Bill will, when it becomes law, help to do just that. The Alliance Party supports the Second Stage of the Bill and looks forward to its early progression and, indeed, its implementation at a later date.

Mr Buchanan: I rise as a member of the all-party group on autism to support the Second Stage of the Bill. The chairman of the group earlier explained some of the thinking behind the Bill and set out clearly the nature of autism or, as it is known, ASD, and the types of challenges that it presents to us all. It is a complex issue, and I am conscious that there are many variations to what we broadly define as autism.

The work that has been done on the Bill so far and the investigations into the issues that surround it have certainly provided an insight into the many problems faced by parents and those who suffer from autism, and I have no doubt whatsoever that there is a real need for this legislation. The all-party group is agreed on the need for the Bill, which has received considerable support across the board, and we are keen for it to progress as quickly as is practically possible. The group's consultation in March revealed an 80% approval rating for the legislation, and, as has been said around the House already today — it bears repetition — NILGA and all the 26 councils have indicated their support for the Bill. Independent research reports are also very supportive. However, like most draft legislation, the Bill is not perfect. Further issues will need to be addressed, but it marks a significant start, takes us on a journey down the right road and focuses our attention on the need to deliver for those who suffer from autistic disorder. We might help to change their lives and provide a better lifestyle for them.

I will set out a few key arguments in favour of the Bill. The Bill has two main aims. First, it seeks to amend the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to resolve any ambiguity as to whether the term “disability” applies to autistic spectrum conditions. Secondly and very importantly, it makes the preparation and implementation of an autism strategy a requirement. That is long overdue.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, as it stands, does not recognise ASD. The Act is quite prescriptive. It defines disability as physical or mental, and the latter includes learning disability and mental illness. That seems fairly comprehensive but, although some argue that it should fit into the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, the reality is that ASD does not fall into any of those categories. In practice, that legal ambiguity has an adverse impact on those who suffer from autism, those who care for them and those who represent them, such as the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Equality Commission and the Children's Law Centre. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the guidance issued under it means that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a person with autism to qualify for benefits such as disability living allowance.

Autism is the fastest-growing neuro-developmental disability in modern society. It is a neurological condition with a biological cause that can be traced to trauma to a specific brain function. It is defined as a social and communication disability. Therefore, to ensure that autism is included in the 1995 Act, the Bill inserts the words “social (including communication)”. Of course, some will say that that opens the door to the inclusion of an almost endless range of groups and categories. I understand that view, but I do not think that such concerns will be realised. It is worth noting that, in 2006, the definition of “disability” was amended so that anyone with cancer, MS or HIV is now deemed disabled from the point of diagnosis rather than from the point at which the condition starts to have a substantial and adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. In a sense, therefore, a precedent for the amendment that is before the House has been set. The change to the definition will give long overdue legal recognition to a condition that is still treated with a high degree of suspicion and scepticism by some professionals and agencies. It will be of considerable help to the various public bodies in their decision-making and in providing guidance.

There are many examples of those with autism suffering from discrimination and not being treated with the respect that they deserve. Take, for example, a pupil who faces disciplinary proceedings for breaching a school code. If his or her behaviour is caused by ASD that has not been diagnosed, recognised or treated in the proper fashion, it seems most unfair for that

pupil to be punished for something beyond his or her control. A change to the legislation, along with greater clarity in the guidance, will ensure that that pupil's autistic disorder is fully recognised.

The proposed change to the Act will also help families, many of whom have battled for years to gain some sort of recognition for the autistic disorder. We hope that the Bill will go a long way to achieving that. Significantly, too, it will signal the end of discrimination against those who have autism but have an IQ of over 70 and who, therefore, currently fall between a number of stools.

The other major change that the Bill will bring about is that it will direct the development of a cross-departmental strategy for autism. At present, Departments are under no legal obligation to do that, and we simply rely on the goodwill of Ministers and officials. I fully accept that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is aware of the need for action. Indeed, it already has in place an action plan, to which a Member who spoke earlier referred. However, its plan does not work for people who suffer from an autistic disorder. The Department of Education is also aware of the importance of the issue but, again, is doing nothing to deliver for those who suffer from the condition. It would make much more sense, therefore, for the key Departments to co-operate rather than developing separate policies. In times of limited funding, it is more vital than ever to minimise duplication and to maximise effectiveness and efficiency. We must try to break out of the traditional silo mentality of the Civil Service. The Bill also provides for a government-sponsored autism awareness campaign that includes awareness training for civil servants. In the current climate of economic constraint, it is incumbent on us all to plan smartly for future challenges. With the Bill, we have made an important start. It presents us with challenges but also with many opportunities.

Most if not all Members around the Chamber today have been faced by parents in their constituency offices who have children with an autistic disorder. They are of preschool age, primary-school age, at high school or college or even in the workplace. Some of their disorders, however, have not been recognised, and others are on huge waiting lists to have their problems and difficulties diagnosed. The process seems

to go on endlessly. That is why the Bill must go through the House today. The legislation is important in helping those who have suffered in silence. I encourage the House to support the Bill.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am also a member of the all-party Assembly group on autism. I apologise for missing some of its meetings. I pay tribute to the sponsor of the Bill and chairperson of the group for bringing the legislation to the Floor today.

Some Members talked about over-legislating, but this is an important piece of legislation, which we need to put through the Assembly to ensure that the rights of people on the autism spectrum are protected and that they get the resources that they deserve. I thank Research Services for its paper on the Bill, and I thank Arlene Cassidy and all the people who have worked to deliver a service to people on the autism spectrum in the absence of a properly funded model.

3.30 pm

I will not rehash what most Members have said, but there are two key issues to do with the Bill. First, the Bill proposes to amend the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and it is time that we ended the discrimination against people with autism. It proposes the insertion of the words "social", "social interaction", which includes communication, and "forming social relationships". That will ensure that all forms of autism will get their recognition.

I will talk from a personal point of view. My colleague Michelle O'Neill talked about social interaction. People with autism may not want to socialise or be with other people, and they may behave in socially inappropriate or naive ways. Difficulties in the area of social communication mean that some individuals may never speak any meaningful language. A further area is imagination, and children with difficulties in that area may not play in a meaningful and imaginative way.

That rings true for me, because I have experienced that with my nephew. Around 15 years ago, that lad was diagnosed with autism. The research paper describes exactly what was happening. I used to buy a Thomas the Tank Engine toy because that was what the young lad wanted all the time. It was easy for me to buy birthday

and Christmas presents because he related to that toy all the time. Fifteen years later, I see that experience written in the paper. People need to be there and to experience it, and, if the Assembly were to do that, it would ensure that the legislation went through to protect those people and give them every opportunity. That lad is 15 years old, and thankfully, he is a clever young lad, and he comes from a good, caring home. He gets the best of care, and he is doing very well. I hope that he continues to do so.

The second aspect of the Bill is the requirement for a strategy. The strategy must look at early intervention. Information from Autism NI states:

"Autism is best diagnosed by a multidisciplinary team".

That is correct. When I think back to the early days when it was discovered in the family, there was early intervention from teachers in schools and from elsewhere, and people gave their opinion. The strategy must produce a proper way of looking forward and of providing guidance to ensure that early intervention happens.

The strategy should also look at the parents, carers and the family. People do not realise the strain, stress and trauma that families experience. For people who are not connected and who do not see it at first hand, I have another paper that identifies clearly what happens. Fifty per cent of parents are on long-term medication; 65% report illness linked to caring; 80% of families report feeling overwhelmed and helpless; and 57% of families report acute anxiety and panic attacks. There is a whole raft of issues, and I want the strategy to provide for the carers to be looked after and for a respite element. I do not want to go down the line that those families want a break away, but they need some respite and some time away.

Dominic Bradley also mentioned cost. He did so in the right context. There is no way that a cost can be put on that. It is extremely difficult for someone to look after a child or adult with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). I do not want anyone to get up and say that it is a matter of cost. I believe that in 2009, the Minister allocated £100,000 for a period of this year. I thank the Minister for that £100,000. However, a great deal more is needed.

I have mentioned costs in one respect, however, an element of the budget and a proper funding package will be identified through this legislation

that will help people with autistic spectrum disorder and their carers. I fully support the Bill's principles. I hope that the Assembly will stand up, take notice and pass this piece of legislation. Any secondary measures flowing from it need to be written up now, so that they will be ready when the Bill is passed.

Mr Craig: I support the Bill. I speak as a member of the all-party working group on autism. The first part of the Bill amends the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The second part deals with the development of an autism strategy. I welcome the Bill's Second Stage. It has been a long time coming, and I am pleased that it has come before the House.

Clause one amends the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Autism is not covered by the 1995 Act, and a number of Members have reiterated that fact. ASD is recognised in disability legislation in other parts of the United Kingdom; therefore, it is important that Northern Ireland falls into line with the rest of the UK.

Some people might ask why ASD should be covered. The majority of disabilities are already covered by section 1(1) of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and they include physical and mental conditions, such as learning disabilities, mental illness, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, visual impairment, schizophrenia, et cetera. All of those conditions are already recognised; however, ASD and associated problems are not. ASD is neither a physical nor mental disability.

The impact of its current status on ASD sufferers is as follows. If someone has ASD and a learning disability, that person receives services from the learning disability sector, which leaves 75% of people with ASD outside those services. If someone has ASD and a mental illness, that person receives services from the mental health sector. If someone has ASD and a visual or hearing impairment, that person receives services from the latter sector. Shockingly, someone with ASD who has an IQ above 70, or who is an adult, or both, has no entitlement to services.

Prevalence levels have reached what is described as the "tipping balance". Now, more people in Northern Ireland are diagnosed with ASD than with learning disabilities. There are now 5,000 school-age children with ASD, compared to 900 in 2002. More people are diagnosed with ASD than the combined total of people with multiple

sclerosis, Down's syndrome and Parkinson's disease.

Mothers of children with ASD show higher levels of stress than mothers of children with other disabilities. Several Members have mentioned that in the debate. Having met some of those parents and their children at a summer scheme in 2009, I can, certainly, confirm that that stress is a fact. I witnessed a child physically attack their mother several times purely because they had been taken out of their routine.

It was amazing to see the patience shown by those parents and how they dealt with that situation. One can understand the stress that that causes to those parents, and I was not surprised when I found out that 80% of mothers of children with ASD take antidepressants.

Significant numbers of people in our prisons have been diagnosed with ASD. That is not to say that that is the main cause for their being in prison, but that condition should have been dealt with long before they reached that stage. That is all very concerning and some of the statistics are also a cause for concern.

Clause 3(1) states:

"The autism strategy must set out how the needs of persons with autism are to be addressed throughout their lives."

In a lifelong approach, the points of transition in an individual's life are prioritised in all strategies and action plans. It appears that it is in the area of transition that the cross-cutting nature of services and co-operation between Departments, government agencies and voluntary and community groups becomes most important. Transitions are particularly difficult for those with ASD to manage, because routine and predictability, which help them to learn, interpret and make sense of social rules and situations, are not always there. It is vital that services plan and work together to smooth life transitions from preschool to lifelong learning.

We can debate the issue until the cows come home, but, quite frankly, unless we have a child with ASD, none of us will fully understand the impact of the Bill on families in Northern Ireland. It is unfortunate for those families that we live in a part of the United Kingdom that discriminates against a group of individuals who fall outside the existing legislation. It is

good that the Bill will rectify that situation, and I commend it to the House.

Mr B McCrea: The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the Bill and looks forward to scrutinising it during its Committee Stage. Members will be aware that the UUP has long been involved in this important issue and has taken a lead role in promoting services for those who are affected by autism in the Departments that it looks after. The UUP is an advocate and a promoter of services for autism in Northern Ireland, and the party feels that it is leading the way.

My colleague from Upper Bann mentioned the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's input into the strategy that he brought forward and the additional £100,000 that he has made available for autism services. I am also pleased to report that in the Department for Employment and Learning, UUP Ministers introduced innovative ways to help those with health conditions, including ASD, to find some form of training and employment that is suitable to their needs.

Mr Boylan: I agree with the Member's point about the additional £100,000 being made available. However, does he not agree that it is about time that legislation is put in place, with a set budget and funding stream, to address the needs of the autistic spectrum?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for his point; it brings me on nicely to an issue that I was going to raise. In Mr Boylan's earlier contribution, he said that the issue is not about costs. However, if we are looking for separate funding streams — presumably, additional funding streams, otherwise there is no point in doing it — the money will have to come from somewhere, and it is difficult to see which Department will have money taken from it to provide for this very needy case. That is because, on three separate occasions, the Member's party voted for cuts in the health budget. When it comes to issues of budgets and finding more money to pay for autism services, the Assembly must realise —

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way in a moment, when I have finished. When the Assembly calls for more services, they should be properly costed, and we must also work out how we are going to target the resources in the right way. We will have an informed discussion during the Bill's

Committee Stage to ensure that we are doing the right thing. I will now give way to the Member.

3.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I look forward to that Committee Stage. However, when every Department becomes involved in a cross-departmental approach, surely they should bring their funding streams to the table as well as their contributions.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for her contribution. That raises the issue of the Department of Education, which she will know something about because she serves with me on the Committee for Education. There seems to be some divergence of strategies, which we should address. Members have raised concerns repeatedly about whether the investment that we make in Middletown really solves the issues that we want to be dealing with. So, I certainly look forward to Ministers and Departments co-operating properly, as they should do of right, to deal with that matter.

Mrs D Kelly: On the development of strategies, and given your statement that the UUP will scrutinise the legislation, can we also have a commitment that unlike at least one other party you will not use a petition of concern to prevent good legislation coming to the Floor of the Chamber?

Mr B McCrea: I assure you that our aim is to make sure that we get good legislation. I concur that petitions of concern should be used for the purpose for which they were intended, and not for other reasons.

We are concerned about certain issues in the Bill. I was taken by what Mr Craig said. I, too, have met the parents of children with autism at summer schools, in their houses and at other places. One cannot help but be impressed by their resilience and fortitude in carrying on and dealing with those things. However, there are very real challenges. Frankly, I will not repeat some of the issues and conditions, because they are distressing. However, I can tell you that they had a very personal impact on me.

I accept absolutely that there are people with a very serious condition who are not yet identified within a statutory framework. The problem with how we fix that is as follows: can we legislate our way out of it? Can we have something that is on a spectrum? How does one define it?

I listened to the proposer of the motion, Mr Bradley, talk about some of the issues that identify people

on the autistic spectrum. I agree that difficulty with social skills and interacting with people are determining factors. However, those are not exclusive to people with that condition. Were the matter not so serious, I might talk about people in the immediate vicinity who have those issues. The point that I want to make without undue levity is the difficulty in constraining a condition that is on a spectrum. There is a question of whether we disassemble the argument that is being put forward.

Mr D Bradley: Since the Member met the parents of children with autism, the children themselves, and others, he will probably be aware that there is quite a stringent diagnostic process to go through before a person is deemed to be at this or that point on the spectrum. So, it is not the case that people will come along without stringent and professional diagnosis.

I am glad that the Member mentioned the positive contribution that the UUP made to the autism debate and to services. I welcome that, and remind him that his colleagues Mr McCallister and Mr Savage supported the Bill at the beginning. That was very welcome as well.

I direct the Member's attention to a 2010 paper from the Assembly Research and Library Service entitled 'Autism Bill', which states:

"In spite of the existing guidance and case law, meeting the definition of disability contained in the DDA is likely to continue to present challenges to those with autistic spectrum disorders. The Bill seeks to amend the DDA in a way which widens the scope of the existing definition in a way which would encompass autistic spectrum conditions."

In order for discrimination against autistic spectrum conditions to end, it is necessary to amend the legislation. That is one of the main aims of the Bill.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for his comprehensive intervention. I spoke to Mr McCallister today — I know that Mr Savage will support this — and he was most insistent that I should be here because, unfortunately, he cannot make it. I assure the Member that Mr McCallister is absolutely committed to dealing with the serious issues that have been raised. Not only have I met families and people that are on the autistic spectrum; I have also engaged, as has Mr McCallister, with Autism NI, Arlene Cassidy, Eileen Bell and a number of other people.

The Member will, of course, acknowledge that there are a significant number of bodies that seek to address the issue and that there is a diversity of views about the best way forward. It is with that in mind that we look forward to the Committee Stage of the Bill, when we can identify the best way forward.

Mr D Bradley: The Member is correct: there is quite a wide range of advocacy groups for people with autism, but all of those groups, as Michelle O'Neill pointed out earlier, are of one mind about the necessity for legislation. What they differ about are the interventions that are most effective, and that is an issue that I will leave to them.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for that. The House will properly give the legislation due scrutiny. The issue, which I am sure the Member will acknowledge is at least a consideration for us all, is that there is a wide variety of conditions, not all of which have their own Bill. People will look at us to see what way we approach the issue. That may well be the appropriate thing to do, but there are other issues that will come along. We are a relatively young and immature legislative Assembly, so it is appropriate that we do not make rash decisions that actually have implications.

Mr Craig: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will, but I want to finish with one last thing. Go ahead.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member talks about the immaturity of this House, but will he acknowledge that the Mother of Parliaments has already passed legislation on this issue? It is wrong to say that there are no legislative criteria out there when the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster can pass legislation on the issue.

We can talk in circles for ages on the issue, but will he recognise that the Bill will do away with a discriminatory factor in respect of autism and ASD, in that it is not properly defined in existing legislation and there are individuals who keep falling outside the scope of that legislation? We are correcting discrimination. That is why the debate about cost is secondary. There may be such implications, but they will have to be dealt with in another debate.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will deal with those points in

reverse order. There are cost implications. I have absolute respect and support for people who are struggling in some very trying situations. The Member has met the same people that I have, but there are implications and we, as an Assembly, need to make sure that we are aware of exactly what they are. In relation to his earlier point about legislation at Westminster, he will, no doubt, be aware that there are different conditions and different strategies over there, and that what was appropriate over there may not necessarily be appropriate here.

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

We will look at those issues at Committee Stage. I will pose a question to the Minister, and perhaps he will deal with it. He knows that, in another place, I have an interest in human rights. I want to ensure that the Bill is compliant with the European Convention on Human Rights, and we must check whether the Bill is competent. I also have some reservations about whether it is compliant with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We must address those issues, and I do not express a view one way or the other.

Earlier, we spoke about people with different views. People have concerns about those issues, and it is right that we address those concerns. Professor Brice Dickson, the former chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, had this to say:

"Autism is a very wide spectrum and to say that everyone who has autistic tendencies is disabled ... would be going I think probably too far."

Mr D Bradley: I explained to the Member that the Bill does not, as it were, allow in everyone with autistic tendencies, and stringent diagnostic hurdles must be got over before someone is included.

The Member rightly cautions the Assembly in its infancy to be careful about how it legislates. However, I point out to him that the Disability Discrimination Act was amended previously to include cancer, HIV and multiple sclerosis. The floodgates were evidently manageable on those occasions, and I do not see why they will not be so on this issue.

Mr B McCrea: I make it clear to the Member, as he has intervened on a number of occasions, that I am not in any way opposing the treatment of, or provision of services for, autism. I do not

argue that changes will not be necessary or are impossible. I merely point out that, as a competent legislative Assembly, we ought to look at such issues to ensure that anything that we do is properly costed and has the intended results, and that we are not capable of doing the things that we want to do in a different or better way. That seems to be the appropriate way for a legislative Assembly to progress, and I look forward to dealing with such issues at Committee Stage.

I warned — I meant it in the gentlest of ways — that we are all here because we represent people and want to do the best for them, particularly for the people in most need. The danger for all of us is that we attempt to boil an ocean. We must not do that. We need targeted intervention for those who are most in need. I am sure that I am not alone in suggesting that that is the right way forward.

I do not want to say much more, but I want to bring out a few points. The Department argued that the cost of introducing the legislation is money that could be better spent on front line services such as attacking waiting lists. We have to consider the issue in the round. Are we doing right by everyone in our entire society? There may be issues about additional funding. I know that Members made genuine and positive interventions, and I was touched by the contributions. However, we cannot cut the health budget and then tell the Department that, by the way, it needs to do more. We have to address that issue.

I conclude my contribution by saying that I welcome the Bill's introduction. I look forward to an informed and reasonable discussion at Committee Stage. I am committed to the issue of resolving autism and helping those who do not get the services that they desire. I realise the problems that are pushed on them. I recognise that it is not only those children or adults who have autism who need help but those who care for them; that was mentioned by other Members. There is a need for respite and for the care of other children who may be involved. I am aware of a range of issues, and I am personally involved. I want to ensure that we do it right. We have to get it right for the people whom we are trying to serve.

4.00 pm

Mr P Ramsey: I am delighted to be participating in this debate, which is hugely important for so

many people across Northern Ireland. I thank my party colleague Dominic Bradley for his passion, commitment and dedication to the matter, which is very close to his heart. I also thank all the members of the all-party group on autism. It was right to bring forward legislation that will end, once and for all, discrimination against so many people across Northern Ireland.

Autistic spectrum disorder is widely recognised in the Chamber as a serious and complex spectrum of conditions. Despite recent focus on the disorder, there is no doubt that the necessary structured services have not been in place to ensure that people with ASD, their families and carers have a reasonable standard of life. The SDLP supports the Bill, because it will remove ambiguity about the status of the condition as defined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and will ensure that the social impairment is specifically recognised in law as a disability.

The SDLP is concerned, as are many other groups and individuals, about the fact that failed cross-departmental action has resulted in inadequate services for people with ASD, their families and carers. The SDLP and others have, therefore, concluded that to ensure that there is a much more co-ordinated cross-departmental approach to providing the necessary services, there must be a statutory obligation on Departments to deliver. Given the cross-cutting nature of the ASD strategy, it is much more likely to be delivered effectively if it is backed up by legislation. The Bill will create a cross-departmental statutory responsibility to deliver an autism strategy.

I am sure that, through constituency work, all Members have met carers of people with ASD who are burned out and deeply frustrated by a system that delivers only in parts. In many cases, carers are close to breakdowns, because, after years of caring, they are no longer able to cope with the emotional and psychological damage. The lack of proper support for many people with autism has led to unnecessary mental health breakdowns and terrible living conditions for people who, in many cases, could live fairly independent lives with some support.

People with ASD, of whom there are many in our communities, need particular help at transitional points in their lives and a highly structured environment and routine to function effectively.

Those transitional points include moving from primary to secondary school; leaving the parental home to living independently post-school age; moving from education to employment; and continuing lifelong education. Parents are often very worried about the ability of their autistic child to cope after either one or both of them has passed on.

There is a lot of concern that many people, particularly adults, are living with autism without being diagnosed. Given the number of children now being diagnosed, it seems very likely that many adults have been undiagnosed and are, therefore, vulnerable and living impaired lives. Such people are liable to suffer all kinds of abuse. There is little doubt that the underlying cause of mental health problems suffered by many people in psychiatric care is autism. There is also little doubt that many people in prison have, as an underlying condition, autism and had there been earlier intervention, they may not have ended up in the situation in which they now find themselves. We need to ensure that, as part of the strategy, proper audits are carried out so that the number and circumstances of people with ASD is widely known.

It is important that I put on record some examples of the cases in my constituency. I recently met a mother in my office who is at the age at which most people should be looking forward to retirement and to beginning to take life somewhat easier. However, she has a grown-up son with autism and is on the edge of mental and physical breakdown because of her constant, virtually round-the-clock work to try to care for her son. She should not be taking antidepressants. She should be getting adequate support to look after the son whom she loves and to maintain her physical and mental health. If anything happened to her, her son would probably have to be institutionalised, which is her big worry and concern. The state would then have to take on all his care needs.

Therefore, even from a pragmatic perspective, it makes sense that that mother should get the help that she needs now. It is a terrible indictment of our statutory system that she has to turn to elected representatives to get the help that she needs to care for her son. What is terribly worrying is that there many people who do not seek that help and are living with that burden, day in, day out.

The SDLP honestly and honourably supports the Bill. We will try to ensure that the social impairment that results from autistic spectrum disorder is defined as a disability and that there will be clear statutory responsibilities across a number of Departments in the formation, periodic reviews and, most importantly, delivery of the autism strategy. The SDLP supports the Bill, but we need to ensure proper support and a decent life for so many people.

Over recent weeks, I have received e-mails and telephone calls, and people have called into my office appealing to me directly, to make sure that I support the Autism Bill. Those are cries from people's hearts, whose family members may have passed on. They want to ensure that, for future generations, we have a proper anti-discrimination and equality law that will protect other children as they grow up.

Mr I McCrea: Like most other Members, I support the Bill. As a member of the all-party group on autism, I am delighted that we are here today for the Bill's Second Stage. That is a welcome development, and I have no doubt that the Bill's implementation will result in delivering positive change for people with ASD. I particularly welcome the fact that the Bill will require the establishment of a cross-departmental approach to ASD.

Clause 3(1) states:

"The autism strategy must set out how the needs of persons with autism are to be addressed throughout their lives."

A lifelong approach and the points of transition in an individual's life are prioritised in all the strategies and action plans. It appears that it is in that area of transitions that the cross-cutting nature of services and co-operation between Departments, agencies, and voluntary and community groups becomes most important.

Transitions are particularly difficult for people with ASD to manage because routine and predictability help them to learn, to interpret and to make sense of social rules and situations. It is vital that services plan and work together to smooth life transitions from preschool to lifelong learning. Such a strategy is vital for people with autism. It is the missing piece of the puzzle for many sufferers of ASD. A lifelong approach that stretches beyond health and social care into education is vital for young people with autism. I believe that we need legislation in order to see

action on a cross-departmental strategy. That is included in the legislation, and we need the buy-in of all Departments to deliver effective and fair services for sufferers and their carers.

In recent years, autism has been underfunded. I welcome the Minister's commitment to autism, and even on Twitter, he has committed to providing funding for autism, but I do not believe that that is enough. I do not wish to get into political point-scoring in respect of who provides the money and matters like that, but I believe that people who suffer from autism, their families, carers and friends all want an Autism Bill. Many people feel that there is no co-operation between education and health, and that is what we hope to change in the Bill.

The Bill will ensure that data collection on ASD will be required and must be synchronised across Departments. That will inform existing and future planning of services and resource allocation. Currently, ASD data collection in the health and social care sector is manual-dependent. The Bill provides for a lifelong strategy that places the welfare of families at the centre and a government-sponsored ASD awareness campaign, including a first awareness level of training for civil servants.

The historic failure to recognise ASD has resulted in a tragic legacy of underfunding across Departments. As the amendment to DDA takes effect, all Departments will inevitably have to address the impact of legislative change to their policies, practice and provision. Clause 3 creates the requirement to undertake that exercise together in an effort to minimise duplication and maximise effectiveness.

In this climate of economic constraint, it is important and incumbent on all of us to play smartly for future challenges. Not only is cross-departmental commitment to joint planning for ASD good practice, it is an opportunity to look afresh at the resources that we have and how they can be used or redeployed while, at the same time, challenging all Departments to work innovatively with the voluntary sector to maximise the accountability, flexibility and creativity of all sectors.

The Bill will make a real difference for families. This measure assures families that government recognises the lifelong and whole-life reality of ASD. It gives assurance of the potential of service development in harsh economic times through shared funding initiatives across

Departments. The Bill makes it clear that ASD is a shared responsibility in our community. Duplication and confusion can, therefore, be addressed and transitions better planned, managed and resourced.

We have heard Members refer to constituency cases. All Members have had constituents come to their offices and speak to them about dealing with issues in respect of education and health. I do not want to pick out an individual case, but my staff and I are there to help people in as best a way as we can. Tragically, however, we have to help people in circumstances like this too often, instead of having things in place so that they do not have to go to their elected representative.

In an intervention during Basil McCrea's contribution, my colleague referred to the legislation that went through the House of Commons. I believe that it was Cheryl Gillan, a Conservative MP, who brought the private Member's Bill through the House of Commons. It has gone through that process, and it received Royal Assent on 12 November 2009. The House of Commons welcomed the Bill. In fact, I believe that there was no disagreement when the Bill was finally put. It is good that most Members across the House can join together, right a wrong and give families, carers and those who suffer from ASD a future that removes any discrimination outside of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and ensures that people with autism have rights equal to those of every other person. I support the Bill, and I hope that all Members will do likewise.

Mr Easton: I rise to support the Bill, which has been a long time in coming. For too long, people with ASD have been left behind. They were left out of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and healthcare initiatives here. To be fair to the Minister, he has increased funding, and Mr Gardiner and Basil McCrea mentioned the £100,000. We would like to see more than that invested in autism. That is why the Bill will create a joined-up approach from different Departments, which, I hope, will lead eventually to more funding coming from other Departments.

4.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: For the record, the Minister produced an extra £2.02 million to underpin the three-year action plan. Only last week, he announced a further £100,000.

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is good that he is blowing the Minister's trumpet. Funding levels have increased.

Last year, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published a regional strategy that took account of contact and networking among all those who represent people with ASD to improve and advance services. The Autism Bill adds to the regional strategy and enhances it substantially.

Currently, 20,000 adults and children who live in Northern Ireland have autism, and more than 5,000 children suffer from autism. The number of individuals who suffer from autism exceeds the combined number of those with Down's syndrome, Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis, as was mentioned by my colleague Mr Craig. In addition, 25% of those who suffer from autism have a learning disability. The remaining 75%, therefore, fall outside the DHSSPS programme of care model. ASD falls outside the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, so the amendment to include "social (including communication)" in the DDA is welcome. All other regions of the UK have implemented changes to DDA to take that into account, so it is vital that we fall in line with the rest of the UK.

Clause 2 relates to the development of a strategy for autism. That is important, as other parts of the UK have had strategies in place for some time, so we have been lagging behind. Wales is recognised as the first country in the world to have established a cross-cutting national strategy action plan for autism. That cross-departmental strategy is aimed at driving improvements for children, young people and adult services in health, social services and education. With it has come a significant level of investment in services and care for those with ASD. The Bill ensures that the Department will prepare a strategy on autism and will publish it not less than two years after the Bill's passing.

Clause 3 refers to the content of the strategy. It must set out how the needs of persons with autism are to be addressed throughout their lives, and that is vital. The strategy also has to reach across Departments, including the Department of Education, as provision for children with autism in our schools is required to facilitate a life plan.

The heart of the strategy must set out how the needs of families and carers of persons with autism are to be addressed. The Bill also

requests that staff in the Northern Ireland Civil Service who deal directly with the public are given autism awareness training, which is vital. It is important that we raise awareness of those who suffer from autism, as it is a life illness that affects a person's ability to speak and to communicate clearly as well as to concentrate. It is vital that we address the needs of those who suffer from autism and work to better their care and lives as well as those of their carers.

Mr D Bradley: I join the Member in welcoming the additional £100,000 that the Minister announced about a week ago to develop specialist adult diagnostic services, but very little can be done with that amount in that context. For example, psychologists are needed in the diagnostic process, but £100,000 would bring very few psychologists in to the system.

Basil McCrea mentioned the £2.2 million that underpins the three-year plan, but that is, in fact, part of the additional resource of £17 million for learning disability services. If my understanding is correct, people who have an IQ of over 70 do not have access to learning disability funding. Part of the Bill is aimed at modifying DDA so that people with an IQ of over 70 will not be discriminated against in the future. I thank the Member for giving way.

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. Moneys for autism have been reduced from £2.2 million to £1.54 million. Perhaps we need some clarification as to why there has been a reduction in the moneys. I agree wholeheartedly with —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No, because I am coming to the end of my speech.

Mr Storey: He has to defend the Minister.

Mr Easton: Go ahead.

Mr Storey: He is the John O'Dowd of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr B McCrea: Compliments indeed.

Members said that this is not about money, but their issue is that we had to make cuts. I think that the figure is £1.6 million, although the Minister will talk about that. It comes back to the argument that if there are to be additional resources, they need to be identified, costed and properly scrutinised. We have to make decisions

about where we want to take that money from, and I have no doubt that we will have the Member's support in finding additional funding for this very important issue.

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. As usual, he is talking a load of nonsense. However, as I come to the end of my speech, I return to the issue that I raised earlier with Mr Bradley. The fact is that the Bill makes no provision for an advocate. He addressed that to some extent. Hopefully, as the Bill progresses and is finalised, and as we put in place all its strategies, we may be able to look at including provision for an advocate at some stage in the future. I support the Bill's Second Stage.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for being present for the debate. I congratulate Mr Bradley, members of the all-party Assembly group and the staff for their work in formulating the clauses and drafting the Bill. I also thank the advocates and the many parents and families of children with autistic spectrum disorder. Constituents of mine are worried about the future prospects of their quite young children, and during the earlier debate on the Commissioner for Older People Bill, we were reminded by my party colleague Mrs Bradley that carers save the Northern Ireland Budget more than £3 billion a year.

Unfortunately, many carers, particularly carers of young children with autism, do not receive much help. That is often because the diagnosis is not clear, and they fall between two stools. For example, one lady with six autistic children does not get any respite care because her children have not been diagnosed with a severe learning disability. She does not have any direct payments in order to plan their care and, for the past five years, she has had inadequate housing to meet her family's needs. The list goes on and on. That is only one example.

I am sure that that lady, like many others, is frustrated by the general lack of awareness. Many young children whom I have met look like quite normal children, as, indeed, they are, except that they have difficulties in interacting and have behavioural problems. Many people blame the parents for bad behaviour and for not bringing up their children properly, when, in fact, those children have a recognised disorder. Therefore, they require special treatment and consideration by health and other services.

Members who contributed to the debate have made it evident that there needs to be cross-

departmental working. Although the Health Minister is here, the issue cuts across the education and employment and learning portfolios. Lessons are to be learnt across all public sector agencies in contact with people with autism. In the same way as staff are trained to work with people with visual or hearing impairments, the Bill asks for special training and consideration to be given to agencies that provide services to people with autism.

Members have referred, rightly, to the funding and the budget for implementing the Bill. However, I venture to suggest that a lot of it is not rocket science. A lot of it is common sense. It is about joined-up government and joined-up service delivery, and it often does not require a huge budget. It is about doing things differently.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that it can make economic sense to have that integrated services and early intervention approach to issues such as autism, because it saves money later?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving me the opportunity to speak as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and to mention the young people not in education, employment or training (NEETS) inquiry report that we will launch in January 2011, all being well. One main recommendation is that early prevention and detection pay dividends in the longer term, not just to the individual but to society as a whole. The Member is quite right that that makes economic sense.

Mr B McCrea: Since we are being so friendly, will the Member welcome the attendance of the Minister of Education at this important debate, as we are going to talk about integrated solutions?

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the Ministers decided between themselves who would be present today. I acknowledge that. I said in my opening remarks that I welcomed the presence of the Health Minister because the subject crosses many Executive portfolios, most notably health and education.

Mr D Bradley: Ms McCann pointed out that the financial costs attached to the legislation can be matched to savings generated by reducing duplication between Departments as a result of an effective strategy. Any financial costs attached to legislation must be measured against the current human costs, the cost of

loss of earnings to families and the cost to the state. That is detailed very clearly in work that has been carried out in the UK, Canada and Australia, and here in the North in a publication by Autism Northern Ireland called 'Autism: The Costs'. Does the Member agree that any financial costs can be met through a phased programme of implementation within funding already available for DDA compliance?

Mrs D Kelly: There are some measures that can be taken quite swiftly that could make a real difference to people's lives.

I am a parent, and I know that although you love your children dearly, they can be very trying. That has to be the case much more so for parents of children with a disability. Those parents are to be commended for their work on behalf of wider society. They should be supported in that role. The Member is right to say that there is a loss of earnings by parents who provide that care.

The other point that the Member made was not just about care but phased implementation. That could be done in conjunction and consultation with the autism support groups. I do not think that people are making unreasonable demands. It should be seen in the context of working together to do things better and to provide better outcomes.

The Bill includes a requirement on each health and social care trust to:

"provide data on the prevalence of autism in its area in order —

(a) that it can publish and update the strategy; and

(b) that the Northern Ireland departments can effectively implement the strategy."

That is a critical starting point. It is something that we have learned in our inquiry into young people not in education, employment or training. We have to know the scale of the problem in order to know how we can deal with it. I welcome that as a starting point for the strategy.

A lot has been said, but I will make one final point. I have family members who have young people with disabilities. One of the greatest fears of an uncle of mine was for the future of his child after he was gone. After his own death, what would his child do and what would that child's future be? Surely we should give some reassurance that society cares, not just about how young people are given opportunities and

allowed to develop into adulthood but about their care into older age. That is something that this Assembly should do. We heard earlier today about how, by bringing forward the older people's legislation, the Assembly is putting democracy in action for older people. Let us have democracy in action for some of the most vulnerable in society: the children and young people who suffer from autism and associated illnesses.

4.30 pm

Mr Girvan: I support the Bill. However, in doing so, I want to make a few points that deal with a number of elements in it. Autism affects not only those who are being dealt with through the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety but other areas of government, such as education and social security. I have dealt with a number of agencies on behalf of people who have been diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum and found that they treat people in the most appalling manner. The Bill would help to provide proper training for those on the front line who deal with people. It has been extremely difficult to get some agencies to adopt a positive approach, so this legislation would be extremely helpful in achieving that.

Much noise has been made about the cost of implementing the Bill. However, as far as I am concerned, we are trying to address an inequality. Equality is peddled regularly in the Chamber. For those suffering from the condition and the families who must deal with them, there is an inequality. We have to take on board all aspects of people's daily living, not just what they have to deal with from a health perspective. To deal with the situation properly, we need to encourage people to come forward.

Mention was made of how we can promote training through the Bill. There needs to be buy-in, so I am sad to see that few members of other Committees and Ministers from other Departments are here, because they will be responsible for delivering funding through their Departments to ensure that training happens. It was said that minimal cost would be involved. I do not know whether that is true. However, we need to support the legislation, and I am glad that it is before the House today.

Every Member who contributed to the debate mentioned facts and details relating to those who suffer from the condition. As far as I am concerned, autism and ASD support groups

have done a fantastic job in helping to bring about this legislation, and I congratulate them for lobbying the all-party Assembly group on autism (APAGA) and the Member who introduced the Bill.

Another point that needs to be made is whether the £100,000 from the health budget is, in fact, additional funding. In interventions, some Members indicated that the amount of money coming forward in recent years has increased. I do not know whether that is accurate, but, in the light of what has been said, it does not appear to be. I am not necessarily saying that we need to spend a lot of money to make things happen, but it needs to be recognised that the condition exists and that it requires special attention. Special conditions need to be put in place to ensure that those suffering from the condition are not put in jeopardy.

I am in favour of the motion, because the House owes it to people who suffer from autism and ASD to have the Bill pass its Second Stage. Such people form a large section of the community, and they do not always receive an early diagnosis, which is a problem that, in the past, was probably endemic in our society. People who are now adults may have suffered all their life without being diagnosed. Another challenge is for the Department of Education to get social workers to identify young people in school who have not been diagnosed. That was another major problem in the past. Early intervention procedures and resources must be put in place to deal with those who have been diagnosed.

Mr B Wilson: As a member of the Assembly all-party group on autism, I welcome the fact that the Autism Bill has reached Second Stage. I congratulate the chairman of the group and all those who put so much work into it.

As other Members pointed out, there have been a number of important and positive milestones on the journey towards meeting the needs of people with autism. Second Stage is another important milestone on the way to eliminating the discrimination against those people with ASD who fall outside the vision of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The all-party group on autism proposes that the Government create a legal obligation for action on ASD by enshrining it in legislation. That is the approach taken by the Autism Bill, and the all-party group believes that that is the way forward. The Bill has widespread support among the general public

and from seven of the eight voluntary agencies that are involved in autism.

As previously indicated, a number of research projects on autism have been carried out in Northern Ireland. Those include the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Library Service's 2008 reports, 'Improving Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)', 'Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)' and its 2010 report on the Autism Bill. Those were independent research reports, all of which support the principles of the Bill. In addition, the Assembly all-party group on autism carried out a consultation in March 2010, which resulted in an 80% approval rating for ASD legislation.

The Equality Commission and Disability Action confirmed that the new Bill would bring clarity. Many Members will recall the walk for legislation rally in which we participated in 2008. All the political parties were presented with a petition that was signed by thousands of supporters of the Bill. Again, all but one of the ASD-specific voluntary organisations supported the general principles of the Bill. All 26 councils have given some positive support for the Bill, and the political parties in the Assembly with, perhaps, one exception, have all agreed to vote for it. Some parties have included in their manifesto their belief that action on ASD should be treated as a priority. There is considerable support among political parties and the general public for the Autism Bill.

As part of the legislative process, the Assembly all-party group on autism issued a consultation document on the Bill to get the views of the various bodies that were involved in autism. The document was sent to 38 consultees across all sectors, and 26 completed responses were received, which was a response rate of approximately 70%. The main findings of the consultation were extremely positive. The need for a cross-departmental strategy was widely supported by 80% of the respondents. They agreed that the new law should require the autism strategy to be cross-departmental; in other words, that all the relevant Departments should be required to work together to agree on and implement the strategy, but not in the piecemeal way in which work is carried out at present, which causes people to fall through the net. Given the diverse needs of the autistic population, cross-departmental accountability is central to the successful implementation of the strategy.

Some 72% of respondents to the consultation supported the need for autism legislation. One respondent noted that the Bill should promote fairness and provide access to and support for services based on the needs of the individual, not on whether such individuals comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Another respondent claimed that the Bill would challenge the exclusion from services that faces many people with autism and their families and carers.

The consultation also highlighted the need for formal partnerships. Again, 72% of respondents agreed that the law underpinning a cross-departmental strategy should promote a partnership among Departments, public bodies and community and voluntary sector bodies, and they emphasised that such bodies had a lot of expertise that must be used. The consultation also highlighted the need for an agreed definition of ASD across all Departments and in guidance. That proposal received the support of 88% of respondents.

There are concerns, but they have largely been met by the Bill. The Bill can improve the lives of thousands of people with autism and their families, and, therefore, I support it.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education (Mr Storey): I speak as the Chairperson of the Education Committee, as it is important that the House be made aware of the Education Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. The Committee received its most recent briefing on the Autism Bill from Mr Dominic Bradley at its meeting on 3 November 2010. The Committee raised a number of issues, including the statement in the Bill's explanatory and financial memorandum that:

"The bill will not have significant financial implications."

That is particularly interesting in light of the requirement in clause 3(5) that all public servants:

"who deal directly with the public in the course of their duties are given autism awareness training."

I will come back to the issue of training later.

The Committee also raised possible unforeseen consequences of the Bill. For example, we considered whether the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 might mean that extreme shyness could be claimed as a substantial long-term social impairment under the Bill.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Yes. The Member's intervention will, no doubt, be as short as all the previous ones.

Mr D Bradley: I have no doubt about that myself. *[Laughter.]* The Member mentioned the example of extreme shyness. Under the Bill, it will be necessary for a person to have a diagnosis, and, as I am sure the Member is aware from his constituency work, a diagnosis is not simply handed out. A strict number of hurdles must be crossed before a diagnosis is complete. There is no laissez-faire attitude whereby something such as extreme shyness will qualify a person.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: I thank the Member for his brevity. We raised those issues with the Department, and we still await a response.

The Committee raised the issue of the Department of Education's view, which was expressed in a letter to the Committee dated 25 August, that both the health and education sectors are implementing a strategic autism action plan and that a high priority is being given to partnership working between the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It stated that there is also an active inter-education and library board ASD group that recently received an extremely positive Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) evaluation.

The final issue that the Committee raised with Mr Bradley on 3 November was about a point that was highlighted in the Department of Education's briefing paper on autism from July 2009. That document pointed out that children with ASD often have other associated serious conditions and that if the autism legislation covers children with dual or multiple diagnoses, that raises the issue of discrimination against children who do not suffer from ASD. The Committee raised those issues during Mr Bradley's presentation, and it is only right and proper that the House be made aware of them.

The Committee for Education raised a few key issues on the Bill on 3 November. The Committee wrote immediately to the Department of Education on 4 November to ask for its views on the Bill as soon as possible, bearing in mind that the Bill was scheduled for introduction to the House.

I must inform the House that the Committee has not yet received the Department of Education's specific view on the Bill. The Committee's statutory duty is to scrutinise the implications of the Bill for the education service. From the Committee's scrutiny to date, it is clear that there are complex issues, such as the implications of the proposed changes to special educational needs policy and its associated legislation, some of which may have important implications for education. That is where the Committee for Education is with the Bill. Until we receive and scrutinise a detailed, specific response from the Department, I cannot comment any further. The Committee will come back to the issue at a later stage.

4.45 pm

I now speak as a Member. I welcome the opportunity to make a few comments on the Bill. No one in the House underestimates or in any way places limits on the seriousness of the issue. That is often the case when Members come to the House to deal with serious and complex issues, such as autism. None of us are experts in the field, despite all our efforts to give that impression to the outside world. The experts are those who have to deal with the situation on a day-to-day basis; the families, the parents, the practitioners and the professionals. They see the huge problems and challenges that are presented by the complex needs of children, young people and, indeed, older people with autism. A Member raised the point that we should not forget that, earlier today, the House endorsed the establishment of a Commissioner for Older People. We should not forget, therefore, that older people also suffer from the condition.

Recently, I received some correspondence, as we all do. All Members are inundated with correspondence, and I pay tribute to those members of our society in Northern Ireland who take the time and make the effort to write. They feel that the issue is important enough to contact their local representative. For many years, apart from local councillors, there has been a democratic deficit at a regional level in Northern Ireland. Decisions were made by direct rule Ministers who did not have to face constituents when they went out to do their normal weekly chores in the supermarket or in the main street of their town.

Now, as a result of the House being in existence, and despite all its flaws and imperfections,

we have opportunities. If those behind the legislation were asked whether, without the House, the Bill would have come to fruition, they would say that that would not have been the case.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that the Bill is not only a case of democracy in action, but is also the right thing to do?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

The Member is absolutely right. It is right that we ensure that we make every provision, legislatively and practically, for those in society. The Member's point is well made, and it is a point that is given.

One particular issue is of grave concern to me. As a precursor to my comments, they are neither an attack on the Education Minister nor an attack on a Minister from another Department. I could easily come to the House and, because my party does not have the health portfolio, say that all the problems with the Bill's delivery emanate from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, Members must realise the seriousness of the issue. Irrespective of their class, colour, creed, where they hang their hat on a Sunday or with which political party they have an affiliation, many families in Northern Ireland are affected by autism on a day-to-day basis. It is easy to say that we should not play party politics with the issue. Unfortunately, however, that often happens with serious issues.

That was a precursor to what I want to say about education.

I have a letter from a parent who raises very serious concerns about the state of current provision:

"The pathway of entry to diagnosis for many children is not through the agreed healthcare pathway we have worked on, but through education. This diagnostic pathway through school we have very little information on. This is a pathway which does not follow an agreed time frame, does not tell us about the agreed diagnostic methods and is, in essence, not open to us to discuss. It depends upon identification by schools and involves several standards of assessment, including paediatricians. This is one of the multidisciplinary assessments which involves educational psychologist profiles."

How many Members have been contacted by constituents who are, rightly, complaining and raising concerns about the psychologist assessments and the way in which the needs of

children are identified? Repeatedly, only a limited number of allocations are given to schools, which is inadequate to deal with all the issues.

That parent went on to say:

"In my personal case, I met with the teacher and delivered information on"

— she then names her son —

"at the start of each year, in his seven years of education."

Now, listen to this:

"One teacher had gone on inset training and her feedback on it was that it was simply not enough help."

Members, we come to this House and stand here and say that we support this Bill. However, are we absolutely sure that in supporting this Bill, we will be able to change the structures that are clearly not delivering for children with autism and their parents?

I conclude by turning to an issue that this House needs to seriously address. It has been raised by Members, and it is the autism provision vis-à-vis the Middletown centre. We would do well to remind ourselves what the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland found in his 2009 report. This is dealing with young people, allegedly, who have autism. This was a body that was set up to deal with the specific problems facing children with autism. The Comptroller and Auditor General said:

"Key services including working directly with young people with autistic spectrum disorders are not being achieved despite the Centre operating since 2007 and it appears unlikely that the position will change in the short term."

Despite £13 million of investment, no direct work with any child has been carried out over this period. At least eight changes have been made in strategic direction.

We talk about a joined-up approach. Earlier, Ian McCrea talked about the missing piece of the puzzle. I think that the puzzle has been thrown up in the air, and we do not know where some of the pieces are. I am convinced that it is not about additional money. If there is an education issue, it is easy for me to say to the Education Minister that she should do x, y and z. And, of course, the Education Minister looks across and says, "Well, I would do that if you would support me and give me more money." I am sure that

every Minister could spend more money. Every Minister could find an allocation where he would be able to put a certain amount of additional money. However, I do not think that it is just about more money. Are we clear in our minds that this Bill will ensure that the money that is currently available is being spent in the most appropriate way to benefit our children?

In my view, what we have in Middletown is a white elephant. I urge the Minister of Health —

Mrs O'Neill: The Member talked about £13 million being spent, and he referred to the Comptroller and Auditor General's comments on how that money is being spent. Does he think that it is a waste of money to train and upskill people to deliver a service for children with autism?

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: That question would be better asked to the parents I have met over the past number of months. No less recently than yesterday, I met a group of parents who represent at least 1,000 parents, and they said that spending has brought no benefit to them as parents of children with autism. I am not interested in boosting some limited company and spending a huge amount of money on buildings that are not built. Salaries are being drawn at a huge cost to the taxpayer, and we are not getting an output.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Member as bemused as me about why the Minister of Education seems to be so set on Middletown? No real argument has been put forward for why we should put that form of expenditure in there. There is general support for dealing with issues and trying to get money to the people who need it, but the argument is not being made. Does he understand why we are continuing to invest in Middletown?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Although Middletown may be an issue for another debate, today's debate is on the Autism Bill. Perhaps we can turn back to that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Middletown is relevant, because the issue is about the amount of money that is mentioned in the explanatory and financial memorandum. That is why I raised the issue at the outset. It was raised in the Committee for Education, because we have to ensure that there will be no resource implications from the issue.

In answer to the Member's intervention, it is not for me to get into the mind of the Minister of Education and explain why she supports certain things. Perhaps I am contradicting my earlier comment that politicians should not play politics with this issue, but I think that Middletown is being supported because of agreements that were made in the past. "North/Southerly" arrangements came out of the Belfast Agreement. The Middletown Centre for Autism was the result of a North/South arrangement.

My point is this: is the money that we are spending being spent appropriately? I am disappointed that Chairpersons of other Committees, on whom the Bill impinges, are not here to speak about what they have done. I know that it is not practical for all of the Ministers to be present when an issue is cross-departmental and requires cross-working, but I ask the Health Minister to take the points that I have made. I have also made the points on the Committee for Education, and we are awaiting a response from the Department on the specifics of the Bill. I ask him to take on board the concerns about the amount of money, Middletown, and the current strategic delivery of the services. Is that being done in the best way that advances the children and parents who have to deal daily with a serious issue, which is, unfortunately, all too common in our society?

Mr Callaghan: I support the Bill, and I appreciate the presence of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I appreciate the contributions from the Chairperson of the Committee for Education and from the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, because, as many Members have said, this is not a provision for a single Department. One of the Bill's main purposes is to try to break a silo mentality that has apparently afflicted autism service provision over many years across this region.

From my attendance at the Health Committee meeting last week and my reading of the submission from the Department, it seems to me that the Health Department and possibly other Departments have an "it will be all right on the night" type of attitude. As Mary Byrne and Ann Widdecombe found out on Sunday night, it is not always all right on the night. Unfortunately, for many families of someone with autism and for children and adults with the condition throughout Northern Ireland, it has not been all right on the night for many

nights and days over many years. That is why I commend my colleague Dominic Bradley and other members of the all-party group on autism for putting so much work into the Bill, and I further commend Dominic for bringing it before the House.

5.00 pm

Unfortunately, the experience of many people with autism and other conditions across the ASD spectrum and their families has been one of disjointed services. Outcomes have been dependent on where they lived or on what staff were available at a particular time or place, and the strategies have been discretionary. The Bill's purpose is to replace the begging bowl and busking hat that families have had to take from one statutory agency to another with a statutory guarantee. It is useful that the Assembly reflects on the point that other Members made about the intervention at Westminster in 2009. Although not all the statutory provisions are identical, Westminster also took the position that it would not always be all right on the night. The House should bear that consideration in mind, as well as the steps that are being taken in Scotland. The position must be reached at which people with autism and their families are seen not as society's burden but as its asset. That potential must be emancipated in the region's legislation.

As I said, I view the Bill as a silo-busting provision. Since I took my place in the House and, in particular, since I was appointed to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I have been contacted by constituents in the Western Trust area in anticipation of the Bill. The message from many of them is that the services are fractured, and they want something to be done about that.

Members on the opposite Benches referred to cost on numerous occasions, as have other Members of the House. The message from families and, indeed, from front line workers who are involved in service provision is that, in fact, services are often duplicated and poorly co-ordinated. Front line workers, who are highly specialised and trained people, are frustrated that they find it difficult to co-ordinate the agencies that work with people with autism. In many ways, therefore, the Bill should release funds through better co-ordination, co-operation and reduction of service duplication.

In the western area, the education and library board side of the house has a dedicated autism team and a communications team that also deals with children with autism. The Western Trust side of the house has a learning disability team, which, I understand, takes the lead in many cases. In addition, there is input from speech and language therapists and so on. I have been told by families and workers that some of those services do not communicate well with one another. In some cases, the uptake of one service can preclude a child or adult from access to another service. That should concern the House, and it is a reason to support the Bill.

I received an e-mail from a front line worker in autism services. She works in the statutory sector, and she said:

"There are so many teams out there that no one knows what the other is doing. It is very frustrating, especially for us on the ground, but more frustrating for the families, given the volumes of appointments that they have to attend. Services for anyone on the spectrum are disjointed. The greatest loser is the child."

The Bill will go a long way in helping to deliver more co-ordinated and better planned provision throughout the region, which will, I hope, do away with some of her concerns.

As I said, more joined-up thinking is needed. It seems to me that the silo mentality here radiates from the very top. At last week's Committee meeting, we received a briefing from departmental officials. I want my remarks to be taken not as a criticism of the Department but as an accurate reflection of the state of play. During that briefing, the Committee was told that the Department's production of a detailed autism strategy was well advanced. However, when the matter was pressed in Committee, it was fairly apparent that officials from the Department of Education had not co-ordinated with the officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when they prepared their autism strategy. Either Department could say that that is fair enough and that no rules were broken. However, the Bill will provide for one statutorily based strategy for the Northern Ireland region, and it will impress a statutory duty on all Departments to co-ordinate in the development of that strategy. That will allow for the better planning of services, with various Departments having an input from the get-go, and the different pieces of the jigsaw,

to borrow an analogy from a Member from a different side of the House, would be put together earlier in the process. That would, ipso facto, lead to better outcomes on the ground.

In order to achieve better planning and outcomes, it is important that the Assembly consider its overarching responsibility to bring together the agencies and their efforts. That is why I again say that autism is not solely a health issue and that it should not be treated as such. I hope that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will receive briefings and input from officials from other Departments, rather than just those from the Department whose Minister is in the Chamber this evening.

The history of autism services in this region has far too often been one of promises not delivered. It is incumbent on every Member to vote for the Bill if they want to guarantee services, rather than potentially risk replicating the delays, distress and disappointments that too many families have experienced. If devolution is to make a difference to people, we need to break that cycle and bring about better delivery. There has been a history of should-have-beens, and it seems that one Department is presenting us with a promise of maybes, but we need to deliver a future of will-bes for the families out there. That is why I, for one, will vote for the Bill today.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I have heard and taken on board the comments of the Members who have spoken on the Bill today. I want to reiterate my commitment to improving health and social care services for children and adults with autism and those who devote a large part of their life to caring for them.

My record on the matter speaks for itself. My Department published an ASD strategic action plan in 2009. That plan set out in detail the improvements that the Department wanted to make and the timescale over which they would be completed. To ensure that those improvements are implemented equally across Northern Ireland, I established the regional autistic spectrum disorder network group, which is chaired by Dr Stephen Bergin. That network group is multidisciplinary and multiagency in nature, and it receives input from colleagues in education services. That goes a long way towards meeting the stated aims of the supporters of the Bill.

Through the network group, we have delivered significant improvements in the service. Despite increased referrals — up almost 40% over the past year — we have made a big reduction in the number of children waiting more than 13 weeks for an assessment. The majority of trusts are already meeting that target, and it is expected that, by March 2011, no child in Northern Ireland will wait more than 13 weeks for an assessment. In addition, I was pleased to announce the development of a diagnostic pathway for children and young people last week. That pathway will be implemented from this month across all trusts and will ensure that, no matter where a child lives in Northern Ireland, they will experience the same assessment process and be subject to the same timescales. The implementation of the pathway will also facilitate more appropriate data collection at trust level and help us to more clearly understand the prevalence of autism here.

As part of the network, I have also established a reference group under the chairmanship of Lord Maginnis. That reference group facilitates the involvement of 30 parents, service users and carers and 10 voluntary organisations in the design and planning of autism services. Those best placed to know where improvements are necessary are now in a position to influence that change. Many parents, carers and those who use social care services expressed strong support for that approach.

As well as establishing that robust infrastructure to deliver improvements, I invested significant money in supporting the action plan. From March 2011, an additional £1.6 million recurrent will be available for autism services. That will support the network to complete the excellent work that it began and to identify and begin work on other priority areas, particularly on adult services.

I was able to do all that within the authority and legislation that is currently available to me. I will continue my commitment to targeting all available resources at front line services to improve the lives of those living with autism and for those caring for and supporting them.

I can advise that the Bill was discussed by Executive colleagues at our meeting on 2 December 2010. Following preliminary legal opinion, reservations were expressed regarding the proposed amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and in relation to the

Bill's compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights. I have sought the view of the Attorney General on the Bill's competence and will return to Members once that view has been received. The Assembly will also wish to reassure itself on the Bill's competence.

Apart from that, my Department will play a full role, as would only be expected, with the Committee as it deliberates on the proposals for the Bill. I look forward to the discussions that will ensue.

Mr D Bradley: I thank all those who participated in the debate. It was a long debate, and I think that all Members who wished to do so had the opportunity to express their views.

I shall start at the end and deal first with the Minister's points. He referred to the attitude and reservations of his colleagues in the Executive about the Bill. Obviously, I am not privy to the confidential discussions that take place in the Executive Committee. The Minister is privy to those discussions, and sometimes it looks as if Mr McCrea is as well, because he happens to have the same reservations about the Bill's compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights. Could I point out to both the Minister —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: I cannot refuse after the Member gave way to me three times.

Mr B McCrea: Since the Member raised the issue, I make the point that I sit on the Policing Board, I chair the human rights and professional standards committee of the Policing Board and I spoke at my party conference on Saturday on the issue of human rights. Human rights and the European Convention on Human Rights are very important to me, and I raised my concerns on that basis. However, it is just a question. Let us find out what the answer is.

Mr D Bradley: I will accept that on this occasion it is mere coincidence that the Member and his Minister have reservations about the same issue. However, I must point out to both of them that the Bill was examined by the Assembly's legal team. It was found to be competent, and that was accepted by the Speaker. However, if there are other legal issues, we are certainly prepared to look at them. I am glad that the Minister is now resorting to the Attorney General for legal advice. Previously, he quoted the Chief

Medical Officer on the issue of legal advice. It is progress that the Minister is now taking advice from the Attorney General.

5.15 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a procedure within the Executive, since the appointment of the Attorney General, that his advice is available. It is not that it is progress for me; it is progress for the Executive that the Attorney General is available to us. The Member should perhaps weigh his remarks in a different direction.

Mr D Bradley: I am suitably admonished by the Minister, and I accept what he says. Of course, I do not think we had an Attorney General when we were originally dealing with this issue, so that is a major development, without a doubt.

In any case, the Minister has outlined the good work that he has done in the field of autism, and we heard earlier about the investment in resources that has gone into much of that work. I welcome that, and I hope that that work is done effectively and efficiently. However, what I hear from some of the autism community in Northern Ireland is that the Department's action plan for autism has in fact disenfranchised a significant section of that community, who feel that the Department's attitude towards legislation is dismissive. Quite a bit of tension has grown up between parts of the autism community and the Department on that issue. We saw that manifested in a recent television programme.

The Department has certainly been opposed to the Bill. The Department is so opposed to the Bill that it was opposed to it before it was even drafted. That is an attitude that requires some examination and re-examination. Officials from the Department were able to tell me some years ago in Washington that it would not agree to legislation. Before the Bill was even seen by the Department, it was opposed by the Department. I suspect that there is an attitude within the Civil Service that, as my colleague Pól Callaghan said, is based in a silo mentality that does not want to change or to co-operate with other Departments.

As we have heard today, autism is a lifelong condition, and it requires a lifelong response. The best way in which we can provide that is through a cross-cutting, cross-departmental

strategy. I hope that the difficulties that we are seeing from the Health Department can be overcome, because it is such an important issue. That has been emphasised by Mr McCrea, Mr Storey and numerous other Members during the debate. It is such a serious issue that, as Mr McCrea said, we need to get it right. As sponsor of the Bill and as chairperson of the all-party group, I am prepared to get it right.

As I pointed out in my initial remarks, we have listened to criticism from various quarters and have reacted and adopted the Bill in response to that criticism. If there is further constructive criticism, we will take that on board. We look forward to Committee Stage and to strengthening any weaknesses in the Bill at that stage.

Mr B McCrea: This is my second intervention; we have one more to go. The Member has rightly put forward arguments and said that he has listened to things. We have also listened to what he has had to say. The Ulster Unionist Party is on record as saying that we welcome the movement of the Bill through to Consideration Stage and we are prepared to engage properly. That is the tone in which we look at it. We are all trying to do our best, but we just want to make sure that we get it right.

Mr D Bradley: I have absolutely no contention with what the Member says. In fact, I welcome his attitude and know that he will engage constructively in the process.

There is a strong case for legislation, and we have made that case. Many Members agreed that there needs to be a change to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and that there needs to be a strategy. I do not want to go through what each Member said in detail, but it would be remiss of me to ignore the various contributions.

The first Member to speak was Mr Wells, the Chairman of the Health Committee. He informed us that the Committee is not totally of one mind about legislation. As Chairperson, he wishes to remain objective, and he will examine the evidence in due course. I accept his position on the issue.

Michelle O'Neill outlined some autism statistics: there had been a 500% increase in prevalence over the past seven years, and there are four times more males with autism than females. She mentioned the fact that proper intervention can help individuals and enable them to lead

a productive life. She was interested in the equality aspects of the Bill and argued that the Bill does not create a hierarchy of disabilities; it does the opposite by giving rights to those who are denied them. Mr McCarthy, who spoke on behalf of the Alliance Party, was very supportive as well.

Mr Gardiner cautioned that there is not always a need to legislate. That was echoed by Mr Basil McCrea. I agree with that point, and I dealt with it in one of the interventions. I am sure that the House does not want me to expand on it again.

Jonathan Craig spoke in favour of the Bill. He mentioned how ASD conditions can fall between various stools and explained that the IQ anomaly discriminates against people with autism who have an IQ above 70. He highlighted once again the need for a cross-cutting approach.

I need not go into the detail of Mr Basil McCrea's contribution. He and I expanded on that sufficiently during the debate, and I hope that I dealt with the arguments that he raised about human rights. However, he has the right to explore those issues as the Bill goes into Committee.

Pat Ramsey also spoke in support of the Bill. He gave the heart-rending example of the mother of an adult son with autism. She was, he said, worn out, and her major concern was what will happen to her son when she can no longer care for him. At this stage, the supposition is that he will probably be institutionalised. That is something that we have to change. No matter what party or side of the House we come from, we have to ensure that we put in place processes and support that make it unnecessary for a person in that position to be institutionalised. We should be working against such an approach.

Ian McCrea described the Bill as the missing piece of the puzzle, and Mr Storey expanded on that metaphor. Mr McCrea underlined the need for buy-in from all Departments. Mr Easton mentioned his major reservation: the absence of the autism advocate. However, I dealt with that issue following an intervention by him.

Mrs Kelly agreed with a phased implementation programme, with funding already available for DDA compliance. She appealed to the House to let us have democracy in action. Paul Girvan said that we are trying to address an inequality and that we owe it to the autistic community to do so. Brian Wilson described the Bill as an

important milestone on the way to eradicating discrimination against people with autism. He outlined the wide support for the Bill and the very positive outcome of the consultation carried out by the all-party group.

Mr Storey raised some issues that were brought to the Education Committee. However, I dealt with those issues in an intervention, so I will not repeat them now. He said that the real experts in autism are those who deal with the issue on a day-to-day basis. Mr Storey also agreed that introducing the Bill was the right thing to do and was, as Mrs Kelly said, democracy in action. He also mentioned the need for the Bill to change the current structures, which are evidently not delivering. Furthermore, he underlined the fact that this is not about additional money but about ensuring that we use the resources that we have to hand to the best effect.

Mr Pól Callaghan welcomed the Minister to the House, and I do, too. I am glad that he is here and that he responded to the debate. Mr Callaghan also welcomed the Chairperson of the Education Committee and the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Mr Callaghan mentioned the silo mentality and said that the Bill should be a silo-busting mechanism to ensure that there is cross-departmental co-operation in addressing the problem.

I have already dealt with the Minister's contribution. I tried to summarise, as best I could, what was quite a long debate with quite a number of contributions. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to you and your staff for enabling us to debate the Bill's Second Stage today. I think that every Member concerned, even those who might have reservations about the Bill, acknowledged that this is an important day for the autism community. I look forward to Committee Stage and to being back here for Consideration Stage. Go raibh céad maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Autism Bill [NIA 2/10] be agreed.

Executive Committee Business

Local Government (Disqualification)

Bill: Final Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Speaker advised the House this morning that Ms Purvis was unwell and unable to move the Final Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill today. This item of business will be rescheduled in due course.

Mr Kinahan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you ask the Speaker to rule on whether it is appropriate to use a petition of concern in relation to the Bill?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Orders, a petition of concern may be submitted on any matter that Members are concerned about. Therefore, it is in order to put forward a petition of concern on any issue.

Mr Kinahan: Could you check that with the Speaker, please? I do not think that it was envisaged that it would be used in that way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will certainly check that. However, I am just telling you what the situation is: it is very much within the Act, and that is how it has been used in the House in the past.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Dromore Primary School

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we begin, I advise Members that the Minister of Education is not available to respond to the debate, because she is snowed in. However, the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, will respond on her behalf. I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr Givan: I appreciate Minister Murphy's standing in for the Education Minister. Indeed, Dromore Primary School was one of the schools that had to cancel its lessons today because of the snow. It is, therefore, a problem that many people are facing.

5.30 pm

I tabled the Adjournment topic because of a desperate need for the financial resources to be provided so that the new primary school can go ahead. I am sure that Members from Lagan Valley will agree. Dromore Central Primary School is located on the Banbridge Road, 200 metres from the town centre. It was originally built to replace First Dromore Presbyterian Church School, Church of Ireland School and the Unitarian School, which was known as Hunters' School. It was extended in 1979 to cater for an increase in pupils from the town and surrounding rural areas.

Today, 697 children are enrolled at Dromore Central Primary School. That figure has grown rapidly over the years, and it continues to grow as many first-time homeowners and young families move into the area. Members who are familiar with Dromore will know that the village and its rural areas have seen a considerable increase in the numbers of young people moving to the area. Many young people moved from around Lisburn because they were often priced out of that area. As a result, they moved to the outer villages around Lisburn city, where they were able to find more affordable housing. That drove an increase in the number of people

moving to the area. The numbers at the school are a good problem that it has had to try to manage. Nevertheless, the vast number of children who attend the school has created several difficulties.

I am sure that everyone will agree that, given the pupil numbers, the current building is not fit for purpose. There are 14 temporary classrooms at the school, and another mobile classroom will be provided in the next academic year because of the increasing demands that will be put on the school.

The school faces a number of problems owing to conditions and a lack of capacity. For example, the assembly hall can accommodate only one third of the children. The standards expected for toilet provision are below what one would expect. Some 250 boys in the more senior years share seven urinals and four toilets. There are no toilets for male members of staff. They use a disabled toilet, but no toilets are specifically set aside for their use.

The fabric of the building is in a deplorable condition. Indeed, when I spoke to the principal this morning, he said that the extension that was built in 1979 is in a worse condition than the main building, which was built in the 1930s. I do not know whether that has to do with the standard of building that took place in 1979 or whether people were better at building in the 1930s. However, the fabric of the building concerns the school greatly.

The board of governors' premises subcommittee recently carried out an inspection and identified 28 deficiencies in the school building. It informed the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) of them. Some of the deficiencies relate to health and safety concerns for the staff and children in the school. I recently asked the Minister about the maintenance backlog in Lagan Valley, and the figure came to almost £6.5 million. Out of 42 schools in Lagan Valley that require maintenance, Dromore Central Primary School has the greatest maintenance backlog, with around £640,000 required. That fact crystallises the need that must be met.

The school rightly feels that the building is deteriorating at a quicker rate because work is not being carried out to deal with the existing problems. One could understand that situation were a new school going to be built. It does not make economic sense to spend that amount of

money if a newbuild is going to be put in place, which is what we are all working towards.

Due to the lack of space in the school, three lunch breaks are required to accommodate the amount of children there. Those staggered lunch breaks have resulted in the costs for supervision and support staff rocketing, because people are required to serve the food and to supervise. The school is concerned about the costs, which exist due to the lack of space and the increasing number of pupils at the school.

I spoke to the principal, and I was aware that the issue had been going on for a number of years. He informed me that his first meeting on the matter with the education board was 15 years ago, and, at that stage, the board was considering options as to how to go about addressing the need that existed then. This process has gone on for a considerable time.

Around seven years ago, the education board proposed to purchase the Mossvale site. It was the only site that could accommodate the type of school that it wanted to build. It was not deemed feasible to demolish the existing school, relocate and build a new school on the existing site, and the board came up with the Mossvale site as the best option. At that time, it was estimated that the total cost to purchase the site and build the school would be £5.5 million.

Issues arose at that time, a number of which related to contamination around the land, and the board had to look into a number of concerns. It took the board two and a half years to consider the issues that had been raised since it was originally going to purchase and build. In that intervening period, the price of the land increased to somewhere in the region of £7 million, and the decision was made that it was still the best option. The land was purchased by the Department of Education, or rather the board, at that renewed value. You can, therefore, understand the deep frustration that exists. The school could have been built, and it could have been in operation for three years now. Furthermore, it could have been delivered for less than the £7 million that was used to purchase the land.

However, we are where we are. Planning permission has been granted. I am aware that there were some issues around planning, but they have been resolved. Design work has been completed for a 28-classroom facility. Everyone I have spoken to is delighted with the proposal,

and they believe that the scheme addresses the needs that exist in Dromore and can accommodate the anticipated future growth. There were concerns that the previous scheme did not meet the needs, but everyone is content with the current scheme and believes that it is a good scheme to proceed with.

In the Department's most recent announcement on schools that are deemed fully or partially compliant, Dromore Central Primary School was in the fully compliant category. Therefore, it meets the Department's policies on the school and the need for a new school. That is why it was such a bitter disappointment for those concerned when, in the recent announcement of an award of around £13 million additional funding for capital schemes, Dromore was not on the list. There was a lot of disappointment.

I pay tribute to the principal and the board of governors. It has taken a long time to get to this stage, and there have been a number of setbacks and disappointments, the most recent of which occurred in the past couple of months. However, they have continued to pursue the needs that exist, and they are trying to put forward their concerns. I know that the board of governors agreed last week to write to the Minister again to ask for a further update. Despite the setbacks, the principal and the board of governors have continued to pursue their case, which, I believe, is very strong.

The Minister followed up on the issue in response to our local MP. The Minister said that one reason why Dromore was not on the list was that the tendering process was not at an advanced enough stage and she had to go for the schools for which planning permission was in place and tendering processes had been progressed. She said that Dromore's tendering process was not at the stage required to allow her to give it the go-ahead. When I speak to representatives from the school and the education board, they tell me that the Department has made it clear to the board that they are not to proceed in developing a tendering case for Dromore Central.

The school would like to have that issue clarified, because it is caught in a catch-22. If a decision is taken to not fund the school because the tendering process is not at an advanced enough stage, yet the education board is telling the school that it has been instructed by the Department to not progress the tendering process, the

school is left in a very precarious position as it wonders whether it will ever get the go-ahead for the project. If that issue cannot be clarified today, I would appreciate it if it could be in future.

The principal has engaged positively with all the people with whom he has been connected. The school continues to campaign for the newbuild. In light of the number of concerns that have been raised, the maintenance backlog and the lack of capacity, we ask that Dromore Central Primary School be made a priority case. I recognise that the financial environment has changed drastically, but capital funding of some degree will still be available for new schools. Dromore Central Primary School has a very strong argument for being made a priority case when funding becomes available.

The need is chronic. The teachers, despite the physical environment, continue to provide a first-class education service to the children, but a newbuild environment would enhance the educational experience. I am on the board of governors of Pond Park Primary School and Ballymacash Primary School. Pond Park Primary School opened its new school just a year ago, and the children benefit greatly from the experience of a new environment, the most up-to-date technology and the play facility. I think that that is what everyone in the Chamber, including the Minister, wants for Dromore Central Primary School.

The case has been well made to me, and I hope that I have been able to convey that to the Minister and the Department. I hope that, in the not-too-distant future, we will get to the objective that I believe we all want to get to.

Mr B McCrea: A number of questions arise. Even if Mr Murphy is not able to handle them, we can at least put them on the record to see whether they can be dealt with. My colleague outlined the case for Dromore Central Primary School in particular, but there are a number of issues that pertain. He asked for that school project to be made a priority, and I understand and fully support his reason for doing so. However, the criteria that the Minister of Education uses to set out which schools should be done in which order are not yet clear. Perhaps that issue could be addressed, because many schools should be prioritised, although the case that was made for Dromore Central Primary School was very compelling and I hope that it qualifies.

It appears that it is difficult for the Department to agree which criteria to use because no Budget has been agreed. We need to get a Budget set fairly quickly. I understand that there may be some discussions about whether to have a one-year Budget or a three- or four-year Budget. If we are dealing with only a one-year Budget, there will be no prospect of a new school because we will not be able to say with certainty that it will be built. That would raise health and safety implications, and there is a legal requirement to make good on this. A large number of schools, including the school that we are discussing today, have health and safety issues. That has a knock-on effect on maintenance because there is a backlog across the entire education budget of approximately £100 million for “essential”, which is the Department’s term, must-do health and safety maintenance. The Minister should address that legal issue.

5.45 pm

I do not wish to progress matters too long, but I wonder whether there is an equality issue. Mr Givan highlighted the beneficial environment that pupils at Pond Park now enjoy. Surely, that raises questions about the equality of provision for children across the constituency. If it is good enough for children at Pond Park, it should be good enough for the children of Dromore. There is an equality issue to be dealt with.

I will conclude on how schools qualify for funding. As a member of the Education Committee, I understand that the most recent allocation of funds was given to schools that could proceed immediately, whether fully compliant or not. Those physically able to start work were given the money. That brings into question the tendering process not being progressed, and that issue was raised on several occasions.

The Minister for Regional Development may ask his education colleague on my behalf: how much money does it take to prepare a tendering case? Surely, we should be advancing schools to the level at which we can at least make a decision, even if it is not prohibitive. I ask that question not just about Dromore Central but about policy in general. Many schools are caught somewhere in the middle of the procurement process. We ought to be able to advance as far as we can with as little cost as we can so that, if funds are available, we can deal with the issue. I would like to have those matters addressed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister for Regional Development to respond on behalf of the Minister of Education.

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Givan for securing the Adjournment debate on the proposed newbuild for Dromore Central Primary School. I apologise for the Minister of Education’s absence. She is unable to attend the Assembly today, but my standing in for her gives the opportunity to air the debate. I am glad to facilitate that and to address Members’ concerns about the progress of the Dromore project. In my constituency role, I am familiar with Mr Givan’s picture of schools struggling to deliver quality education in the surroundings in which they sometimes find themselves.

The debate also provides an opportunity to highlight the significant challenges and the tough decisions that the Education Department faces in light of its reduced capital budget allocation and the uncertainty surrounding budget allocations for future years.

The Minister fully recognises the difficult conditions that the principal, staff and pupils at Dromore Central Primary School have to endure. She also fully appreciates that those difficulties will be fully alleviated only by the provision of a fit-for-purpose school building. Unfortunately, Dromore Central is not unique in that respect. Historic underinvestment in our schools estate means that many of our schools are in a similar position. The concerns expressed about Dromore Central Primary School are well heard, and the Minister is acutely aware that the building of any new school makes a significant difference to children, teachers and the wider community.

The Education Department’s capital budget of £182 million is wholly committed in the current year. The major works funding available this year has been used to complete seven PPP projects: Belfast Boys’ Model School; Grosvenor Grammar School; St Cecilia’s College and St Mary’s College in Derry; St Mary’s Primary School in Portglenone; St Joseph’s Primary School in Carryduff; and Ballysillan youth club. They have all been completed this year, resulting in a reduction of £117 million in the amount available for allocation to conventional projects. In addition, six further conventionally funded newbuild projects are under construction.

As Members know, the Education Minister has strongly lobbied the case for investment, and she was glad that the June monitoring round resulted in an additional £13 million for capital investment in the schools estate. That enabled a further 13 projects to commence this financial year and one site acquisition to be made for another project. As we are almost halfway through the financial year, it was possible to consider only those projects sufficiently advanced in the planning and tendering process to ensure that the funds could be used before 31 March 2011.

I appreciate that Dromore Central, like many other schools, was disappointed not to have been included in the announcements. However, the Minister assures staff and parents that she would like to continue to press the case for more money. If and when she receives funds, she will push forward with the school building programme.

Mr Givan raised the almost catch-22 situation of Dromore being told not to be in the tendering process only for those schools that were in it to be awarded funding. Departmental officials are here. I assume that that happened because the tranche of money was not planned, and, perhaps, money that was not expected was received in the June monitoring round, with those schools that were most ready to go ahead suddenly becoming active projects. I am sure that departmental officials will consider the Member's remarks and respond to them.

Basil McCrea asked a number of questions. Again, I will ensure that officials respond, but he asked about the criteria for prioritisation of projects, given the potential reduction in budgets. The Department is developing criteria to prioritise the remaining projects on the investment delivery plan. That cannot be finalised until the amount of future funding is known. Hopefully, we will know that in the coming days or weeks. That will determine the level of fine-tuning needed to identify what money is available for competing projects. The Department will continue to engage on that subject with interested Members as well as with members of the Committee.

Looking to the future, the spending review outcome announced on 20 October 2010 provided a Budget settlement for the next four years. It will now be for the Executive to shape a new Programme for Government and a draft Budget that will set departmental spending plans. Once those plans have been agreed, the Minister

will be able to assess the outcome and the implications for education services over the next four years.

If we are serious about renewing the fabric of our schools estate and want to build new schools, even in this extremely challenging financial environment, we must ensure that capital funding for the schools estate is a top priority. It is obvious that the rate at which we can build new schools is totally dependent on the available resources. The Education Department is developing priorities for investment that will be finalised when future funding levels are settled. The level of funding will determine the degree to which competing projects can be distinguished, all of which are, no doubt, deserving.

Those challenges are wide. Despite being acutely aware of the problems at Dromore Central Primary School and other schools in every sector, the Minister cannot give a commitment to set start dates for new projects or assurances about the progress of any particular major works project. She desperately wants to build new schools and has 54 projects, including Dromore Central, which have been identified for major capital works funding. A further 114 potential projects are at various stages of feasibility study and economic appraisal. All those schools have been identified as having serious accommodation issues.

The Minister of Education aims to put the best interests of children and young people at the centre of her considerations. They deserve to be educated in a comfortable, safe and modern school. She has urged Executive colleagues — and I can bear witness to this — to give priority to spending on the schools estate and to ensure that she can make that possible.

I thank the Member for bringing the debate. I hope that I was able to answer some of the issues that he raised.

Lord Bannside: Will the Minister do something now about the toilet facilities there? That is a very serious matter. If there are not proper toilet facilities, dear knows what could spread among the people. Can something be done along that line?

The Minister for Regional Development: I will certainly pass that request on to the Minister. I have no doubt that that will be considered very seriously. As Mr Givan pointed out, Dromore Central urgently requires capital improvements

as well as a new school. Toilet and sanitary facilities would be considered to be a very important issue. I know from my own experience in dealing with other schools that similar problems have arisen. I have no doubt that the Minister will push very hard when she identifies the capital budget available to her. It will, obviously, be a matter of prioritisation, but I will ensure that officials and the Minister are aware of the Member's concerns in that regard.

Hopefully, I have answered some of the points that have been raised. If others have not been covered, the officials have undertaken to study the Hansard report and to write to Members.

Adjourned at 5.53 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Oideachas

Soláthar san Earnáil Oideachais

*Arna fhoilsiú ag 12:00 meán lae
Dé Máirt 23 Samhain 2010*

An tAire Oideachais (Ms Ruane): A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhian liom ráiteas a thabhairt don Tionól ar roinnt ceisteanna tromchúiseacha a bhaineann le soláthar a tháinig chun solais in dhá Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlann agus le cuntas a thabhairt ar na bearta atá á nglacadh agam.

Baineann an chéad cheist acu le faomhadh agus le soláthar do scoil nua ag Magherafelt High School. D'fhaomh mo Roinn scoil nua 500 áit ach chuir an NEELB tairiscint amach sular tugadh faomhadh iomlán don Bhreithmheas Eacnamaíochta. Mar gheall air sin bhí moill ann sula rabhthas in ann an conradh a thabhairt chun críche. Idir an dá linn, chuir an Bord Breithmheas Eacnamaíochta eile isteach ag iarraidh scoil 600 áit. Seachas an togra a chur amach arís faoi choinne tairisceana shocraigh an Bord leanúint leis an scoil 500 áit le faomhadh na Roinne ar chostas £8.2m. Bheadh aon mholadh leis an chonradh a athrú nó le dara céim a chur amach ar thairiscint faoi réir chomhaontú agus fhaomhadh na Roinne. Tuigeann an Roinn gur cuireadh tús le tógáil na scoile 500 áit i mí Eanáir 2010.

I mí Mheán Fómhair 2010 mar gheall ar imní a tháinig chun tosaigh i mo Roinn faoi nádúr na hoibre tógála a bhí ar siúl, scríobh mo Roinn chuig Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirthuaiscirt le soiléiriú a fháil ar roinnt buncheisteanna. Tá an soiléiriú sin fós gan fhreagairt i ndiaidh dhá fhreagra ón Bhord. I litir a cuireadh ar 22 Deireadh Fómhair 2010 áfach, thuairiscigh Príomhfheidhmeannach an Bhoird:

Education

Procurement in the Education Sector

*Published at 12:00 noon on
Tuesday 23 November 2010*

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement to the House on some serious procurement issues which have come to light in two Education and Library Boards and to outline the steps I have taken in response.

The first relates to approval and procurement of a new school for Magherafelt High School. A new 500 place school was agreed by my Department but was tendered by the NEELB before the Economic Appraisal was fully cleared. As a result there was a delay before the contract could be finalised. In the interim the Board submitted a further Economic Appraisal making the case for a 600 place school. Rather than retender the project the Board decided to proceed with the 500 place school with Departmental approval for a cost of £8.2m. Any proposal to vary the contract or tender a second phase would be subject to agreement and approval of the Department. It was the Department's understanding that construction of the 500 place school began in January 2010.

In September 2010 in the light of concerns arising in my Department about the nature of the construction work under way, my Department wrote to the North Eastern Education and Library Board seeking clarification on a number of fundamental issues. That clarification is still outstanding following two responses from the Board. In a letter of 22 October 2010 however the Chief Executive of the Board reported that the Board:

go ndearna an Bord comhaontú leis an chonraitheoir leasmhar agus mar gheall air seo, rinneadh obair thógála gan an faomhadh riachtanach ar fad bheith i bhfeidhm sa Roinn; agus

go ndearna an Bord íocaíocht ar an obair atá déanta, lena n-áirítear gné nár fhaomh an Roinn.

Chomh maith leis sin, bhain an Príomhfheidhmeannach de tháta gur thabhaigh an Bord caiteachas sa bhliain airgeadais 2010-11 a d'fhéadfaí a mheas mar mhírialtá. D'áitigh mé go láidir le cistí a fháil le hinfheistiú a dhéanamh i scoileanna nua agus leanfaidh mé den áitiú láidir seo. Is rí-léir gur chóir cistí mar seo a infheistiú de réir an pholasaí ar sholáthar poiblí, de réir an chreata rialaithe leasmhair agus de réir riachtanas Managing Public Money. Is ábhair bhuartha agus thromchúiseacha iad na ceisteanna atá ag teacht chun tosaigh ag Magherafelt High School agus mar Aire Oideachais, tá dualgas orm – agus is tábhachtach an dualgas é – trédhearcacht, dea-rialachas agus luach ar airgead a chinntiú don cháiníocóir.

Mar sin de, thionscain mé imscrúdú seachtrach ar chúinsí uile an tsoláthair agus na hoibre a bhain leis an chonradh seo. Tá mé ag dréim leis go mbeidh an tuairisc ar an imscrúdú agam roimh an Nollaig agus socróidh mé ansin na chéad bhearta eile atá de dhíth.

Is féidir liom a dhearbhuí don Tionól gur cuireadh an Oifig Iniúcháireachta ar an eolas faoi na forbairtí seo.

Baineann an dara ceist le buarthaí tromchúiseacha i ndáil le cleachtais soláthair i mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt. I mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2010 chuir Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt in iúl don Roinn go raibh calaois amhrasta ann maidir le suiteáil saoráide téimh in iarbhunscoil. Rinne an fhoireann Iniúcháireachta Inmheánaí sa Bhord imscrúdú ar an cheist a bhain le hathrú ar an tsonraíocht agus suiteáil dóirí athláimhe.

has entered into an arrangement with the contractor involved which has resulted in construction works without all the necessary approvals being in place with the Department; and

has made payment for the work which has been done including an element which has not been approved by the Department.

Moreover the Chief Executive concluded that the Board has incurred spend in the 2010-11 financial year which may be deemed irregular. I have argued strongly for funds to invest in new schools and I will continue to do so vigorously. It is self evident that such funds should be invested in line with public procurement policy, the control framework applying and the requirements of Managing Public Money. The issues emerging around the Magherafelt High School are serious and worrying and as Minister of Education I have a duty – one I take very seriously – to ensure transparency, good governance and value for money for the taxpayer.

I have initiated therefore an external investigation of all the circumstances around the procurement and work associated with the contract. I expect to have the report of this investigation before Christmas and will then decide what further steps are needed.

I can assure the House that the Audit Office has been briefed on these developments.

The second issue relates to serious concerns around procurement practices in the South Eastern Education and Library Board. In October 2010 the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board alerted the Department to a suspected fraud involving the installation of heating plant in a post primary school. The matter which related to the change in specification and the installation of second hand burners was then investigated by the Board's Internal Audit staff.

Mar thoradh ar na himscrúduithe seo chuir an Bord comhad faoi bhráid an PSNI. Fágfar faoin PSNI anois measúnú a dhéanamh ar cé acu atá go leor fianaise ann le hionchúisimh a thabhairt agus ina dhiaidh sin, bainfidh sé leis an tSeirbhís Ionchúiseamh Poiblí. As siocair go mbeidh sé seo faoi réir imeachtaí dlí níos mhaith liom rud ar bith eile a rá ar an ábhar. Coinneofar an Oifig Iniúchóireachta ar an eolas arís eile.

Thaispeáin imscrúdú Fhoireann Iniúchóireachta Inmheánaí an bhoird go raibh mírialtachtaí ann maidir le feidhmiú Conartha ar Théarma Socraithe (MTC) i leith na hoibre cothabhála a dhéanann Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann an Oirdheiscirt. Cuireadh na buarthaí seo in iúl do mo Roinn. Nuair a cuireadh ar mo shúile dom, bhí an oiread sin imní orm gur iarr mé go n-imlonnófaí baill foirne ó fhoireann Iniúchóireachta Inmheánaí na Roinne láithreach le sonraisc agus doiciméadúchán tacaíochta ábhartha a aithint, a fháil agus a anailísiú.

Tá imscrúdú cuimsitheach ar fheidhmiú an chonartha agus an chleachtais níos leithne soláthair san SEELB coimisiúnaithe agam anois. Beidh roinnt snáitheanna oibre i gceist leis seo agus comhordóidh Grúpa Maoirseachta faoi chathaoirleacht an Ard-Rúnaí iad.

Beidh an pobal i gcoitinne ag súil le himscrúduithe iomlána cuimsitheacha ar fhíricí an cháis seo agus cinnteoidh an t-imscrúdú é seo. Díreoidh sé ar fheidhmiú an Chonartha ar Théarma Socraithe áirithe seo agus déanfaidh sé iniúchadh ar cé acu ar tharla aon mhírialtachtaí i mbainistiú an chonartha. Mar sin de, beidh sainfhoireann oilte um imscrúdú ar chalaos de dhíth. Beidh sé i gceist aige fosta athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar chleachtas soláthair agus ar nósanna imeachta taobh istigh den Bhord lena aithint cé acu an cás aon uaire é feidhmiú an Chonartha ar Théarma Socraithe áirithe seo.

Tá clár suntasach oibre i gceist leis an imscrúdú seo. Coinneoidh mé an Tionól ar an eolas faoi na himscrúduithe seo agus faoi aon bhearta a ghlacfar mar gheall orthu. Cuireadh an Oifig Iniúchóireachta ar an eolas arís.

As a result of these investigations the Board has now passed a file to the PSNI. It will now be a matter for the PSNI to assess if the level of evidence is sufficient to pursue prosecutions and thereafter a matter for the Public Prosecution Service. As this may be the subject of legal proceedings I do not intend to comment in any detail further. Again the Audit Office has been kept fully informed.

The investigatory work of the board's Internal Audit Team turned up irregularities in relation to the operation of a Measured Term Contract (MTC) for maintenance work by the South Eastern Education and Library Board. These concerns were conveyed to my Department. On being briefed I was so concerned that I immediately directed that staff from the Department's Internal Audit team be deployed to identify, secure and analyse invoices and relevant supporting documentation.

I have now commissioned a comprehensive investigation into the operation of the contract and wider procurement practice in the SEELB. This will involve several strands of work which will be co-ordinated by an Oversight Group chaired by my Permanent Secretary.

I believe the public will expect no less than full and comprehensive investigations of the facts in this case and this is what my investigation will ensure. It will focus on the operation of this particular Measured Term Contract and will investigate whether any irregularities in the management of the contract have occurred. As such it will involve trained specialist fraud investigation staff. It will involve also a review of procurement practice and procedures within the Board to identify whether the operation of this particular Measured Term Contract is an isolated case.

This investigation involves a substantial programme of work. I will of course keep the Assembly updated on these investigations and subsequent actions taken. Again the Audit Office has been briefed.

Ar deireadh, mar gheall ar na heachtraí seo shocraigh mé go bhfuil gá le níos mó gníomhuithe le go mbeidh mise mar Aire agus le go mbeidh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin cinnte de go bhfuil cleachtais sholáthair ar fud na hearnála oideachais gairmiúil agus oiriúnach don fheidhm, go dtugann siad luach ar airgead agus go gcloíonn siad le polasaí Soláthair Phoiblí an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin.

Mar sin de, d'iarr mé ar mo Roinn obair a dhéanamh le hlonad aontaithe um Shaineolas ar Sholáthar (CoPE) a chruthú don earnáil oideachais chomh luath agus is féidir. Beidh mo Roinn i gceannas ar an obair seo le tacaíocht ón LárStiúrthóireacht Soláthair. Díreoidh sé ar chleachtas soláthair agus ar an chumas le bainistiú a dhéanamh ar chonarthaí a eascraíonn as. Is éard a bheas i gceist ná measúnú seachtrach ar an chumas agus ar an chleachtas reatha ar fud na hearnála oideachais uile.

Dá mbeadh ESA i bhfeidhm bheadh lonad aontaithe um Shaineolas ar Sholáthar don earnáil oideachais chóir a bheith cruthaithe cheana féin.

Mar gheall ar na heachtraí seo tuigfidh tú gur tosaíocht liom an obair seo agus chuir mé é sin in iúl do mo Roinn. Tá dualgas orainn leasanna an cháiníocóra a chosaint trí rialtacht, trí chuibheas agus trí luach ar airgead a chinntiú i gconarthaí atá á maoiniú ag cistí poiblí agus caithfidh go bhfeictear muid ag comhlíonadh an dualgais sin. Beidh mé ag súil leis go nglacfaidh gach eagraíocht oideachais páirt agus go gcomhoibreoidh siad go hiomlán leis an obair seo.

Is ceisteanna tromchúiseacha iad seo atá mé i ndiaidh a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil inniu. Is féidir liom dearbhú a thabhairt faoi mo thiomantas féin agus faoi thiomantas mo Roinne le himscrúdú iomlán a dhéanamh orthu agus lena chinntiú go mbíonn na cleachtais agus na nósanna imeachta soláthair san earnáil oideachais ar an chaighdeán is airde.

Finally, in the light of these events I have determined that further action is needed to provide assurance to me as Minister and to the Executive that procurement practices across the education sector are professional, fit for purpose, provide value for money and reflect the Public Procurement policy of the Executive.

I have therefore directed my Department to take forward work to create a unified Centre of Procurement Expertise (CoPE) for the education sector as quickly as possible. This work will be led by my Department with support from Central Procurement Directorate. It will focus on both procurement practice and the capacity to manage the resultant contracts. It will involve an external assessment of the existing capacity and practice across the whole education sector.

If we had put ESA into place we would already have been well down the road to creating a unified single Centre of Procurement Expertise for the education sector.

In the light of events you will understand that I now regard this work as a priority and I have directed my Department accordingly. We have a duty to protect the interests of the taxpayer by ensuring regularity, propriety and value for money in publicly funded contracts, and being seen to do so. I will expect all education organisations to participate and co-operate fully with this work.

These are serious matters I have brought before the House today. I can assure you of my commitment and that of my Department to fully investigate them and ensure that procurement practices and procedures in the education sector are conducted to the highest standards.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Environment

25 November 2010

Local Government Finance Bill (NIA 14/09)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Cathal Boylan (Chairperson)
Mr Patsy McGlone (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr John Dallat
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Peter Weir
Mr Brian Wilson

Witnesses:

Ms Julie Broadway	
Mr Dickson Holliday	<i>Department of the</i>
Ms Lizanne Kennedy	<i>Environment</i>
Mr John Small	

The Chairperson (Mr Boylan): I welcome Julie Broadway, John Small, Lizanne Kennedy and Dickson Holliday from the Department. We will now go through clauses 1 to 48 and schedules 1 and 2 and seek the Committee's position on each. A clause-by-clause table with the issues raised and the Department's responses is in members' packs.

This is the last opportunity that members will have to discuss the Bill, and all decisions are final. On the odd occasion, the Committee has got to Consideration Stage and had to make changes; therefore, we will try to iron out all the issues today. Julie and her team are here in case we need to ask questions.

I apologise for being late, as I know that the witnesses were in time. Ignore our earlier conversation in the corridor just in case.

Mr Weir: You are raising suspicions.

The Chairperson: Do not record that. *[Laughter.]*

Clause 1 (Duty to make arrangements)

The Chairperson: I remind members that they deferred a decision on clause 1 until they saw the research paper by NILGA on the role of the chief financial officer, councils' capacity to appoint an existing officer as the chief financial officer, and the status quo in councils. Of the 17 councils that responded to NILGA, 16 advised that they could re-designate an existing officer as a chief financial officer, two already operate a separate system, three have qualified accountants as chief executives and one indicated that it would need to recruit externally for a chief financial officer.

A letter from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) states that although it has no strong opinion on the separation of the chief executive and chief financial roles, it believes that it is important not to undermine the chief executive's role as chief accounting officer.

I remind members that the Department intends to issue a local government circular to councils supporting the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) statement, which includes recommendations that the chief financial officer should hold membership of a recognised professional accountancy organisation and be a key member of the council's leadership team. It also implies there should be a separation of the two roles. The Department plans to include a legislative provision to separate the roles in the proposed local government (reorganisation) Bill.

The clause will allow for a designated officer to be appointed and it will be up to councils to decide whether it will be one or two roles. Julie, do you wish to make any comments?

Ms Julie Broadway (Department of the Environment): What you said is clear, Chairperson. The clause does not deal with a separation of roles; it just ensures that someone is designated as chief financial officer.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with the clause?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Accounting practices)

The Chairperson: I remind members that no issues were raised about clause 2 and that members were previously content with it.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Annual budget)

The Chairperson: I remind members that no issues were raised about clause 3 and that members were previously content with it.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Report by chief financial officer on estimates)

The Chairperson: Clause 4 is the report by the chief financial officer on estimates. The Department provided clarification that robustness should derive from roles' separation, which ensures that there is a chief financial officer dedicated to, and responsible for, the preparation of the estimates and who can follow through on guidance issued by the Department, accounting standards and the CIPFA Prudential Code.

Members previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response on the matter.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 (In-year review)

The Chairperson: I remind members that the Committee had no issues with clause 5 and that members were previously content with the clause.

Mr Dallat: Are we happy that the clause is sufficient to compel councils to keep their financial positions under review? I ask that because you could either look at the file every morning or have a mechanism to do it.

Mr John Small (Department of the Environment): The local government audit mechanism is our key method of control.

Mr Dallat: I do not know; I am just asking the question.

The Chairperson: Therefore there is already a mechanism.

Mr Small: Yes.

Mr Buchanan: Is the role of the local government auditor robust enough? Does the way that the auditor keep an eye on council finances, how those finances are spent and how councils are run need to be tightened? Is the provision robust enough to ensure that nothing goes awry in councils' finances?

Mr Small: That is a subjective question, because it is very difficult to measure whether the role is robust enough; it would be very difficult to decide who would make that decision.

When the local government auditor was here, he said that he had enough powers. Moreover, we are bringing in additional powers in the Bill to assist him, which he did not mention because they were not relevant to him. If things went wrong, those powers would enable us to reduce the borrowing limit of a council and to hold reserves. That would be quite an transmission of power, which would arise in the course of the auditor's investigations. After the auditor had consulted with and advised the Department, we would take a decision on whether to use those powers. That would be unusual; nonetheless, we would have the powers at our disposal.

Mr Buchanan: Sometimes the audit commission only steps in when something has happened that has caused alarm and when money has been spent in a way that it should not have been. The issue is earlier intervention to ensure that finances are protected and not spent in the wrong way.

Mr Small: That is our stable-door discussion. We talked about that issue, and there is no way of preventing something before you know that it will happen. That will always be the position. If there is an alert, the best that we can do is have a system that allows the local government auditor to go in at very short notice to see what is happening and provide the Department with a report. After that, any action will be subsequent to the event.

Mr McGlone: You are quite right about the stable-door discussion. Thank you for raising that point. However, I do not accept your view

that there is no way to prevent something happening; of course there is.

Mr Small: I meant that it is difficult to act before you know that something will happen.

Mr McGlone: If the local government auditor or the Department are alerted to a problem, there is a mechanism for dealing with it. Mr Buchanan's point is the same as mine: intervention needs to happen much earlier. We cannot wait until the local government auditor comes down, possibly 11 months later, to review the books, because if he highlights a problem it will take another six or eight months before any action is concluded by which time the issue is out the door. The big question is how to get earlier intervention to prevent something like that happening.

Mr Small: We have that power.

Mr McGlone: You may have it; the issue is whether it is used. Anecdotal and evidential information has been drawn to my attention that that power is rarely, if ever, used. There are some issues with individual councils, which I do not want to get into at the moment, but it is clear that any mechanism that could be introduced would provide much earlier intervention. It is not good enough to say that the power is there to do it; there must be the will to do it and more of a get-up-and-go attitude when attention is drawn to problems.

The Chairperson: I remind members that the Committee was generally content with the previous response.

Mr W Clarke: I declare an interest as a local councillor.

Mr Dallat: I no longer need to declare an interest; I stopped double-jobbing. *[Laughter.]* The contributions by Tom and Patsy are very valid. There is no system in place to stop things going wrong, and local councils do not have internal committees like the Assembly's Public Accounts Committee. Some have, but, to be honest, they are scratching around to find out what they should do. Is there something in legislation that will compel councils to have audit committees and mechanisms so that they do not spend all the money and that problems are only discovered by the local government auditor during his annual visit? There have been some outrageous scandals involving ratepayers' money being spent wrongly.

Ms Broadway: As part of the policy proposals for the reorganisation of local government it was considered whether the larger councils should have audit committees.

Mr Dallat: That is a good point. I wonder why on earth we are considering a Bill that will probably not apply until the review of public administration (RPA) comes round again — if it does; it may not. Should we have a laissez-faire system, or no system at all, while someone decides whether we should have RPA? There is no point in wasting our time if we do not get the legislation right. There is a big gap here, Chairman, and you know it. There are still cheque-book payments from councils shifting out of hip pockets, and it must stop.

The Chairperson: I totally agree in part with some of those comments. However, councillors have a role to challenge. I sat on a council —

Mr Dallat: I sat on a council for 33 years.

The Chairperson: There are executive committees in some councils. There needs to be a mechanism to check for problems, and bad practices in some councils have been highlighted.

Mr Dallat: Councillors will be the last to hear about —

The Chairperson: In some cases that is true. However, in corporate councils the challenge function is in the council chamber, and it is up to councillors to ask questions. Clause 6(2) states that:

"The chief financial officer of a council shall submit to the council a report on the adequacy of any proposed financial reserves"

That provision may help in the process.

Mr Dallat: Barings Bank.

Ms Broadway: Would you like us to take the issues of the audit powers back to the Minister and look again at the powers of the local government auditor?

Mr Dallat: No; we are discussing the Bill.

Mr Weir: No one has raised any issue about this in the Bill, and I am mindful of that when we are talking about making changes. Some things have been done better in some councils than in others, and, when it has not been done well, the failing is not through any lack of power.

Ultimately, it is councillors who should run a council by setting its policies and ensuring that things happen. The buck stops with them. Sometimes officers overstep the mark, but only because councillors allow them to do so. Councillors must take ultimate responsibility. We may not be perfect in North Down Borough Council, but the way that we conduct our business there is pretty thorough.

There are statements of accounts, which an audit committee deals with. However, I have seen other councils where I think that that process is not done as well. The buck stops with councillors, who have allowed others to get away with it. I do not think that the situation has been caused by any lack of formal regulation, because, to be perfectly honest, it has been caused by lack of action on the part of councillors. That is difficult to legislate for.

Mr W Clarke: Following on from what the Chairperson and Mr Weir said, there is an onus on councillors to act. They are elected, and they sit on committees to look at budgets and financial statements. I declared an interest as a councillor, and, from my own experience, I know that if I see any wrongdoing or money going into an area that it should not, I make sure that that issue is raised with the local government auditor for it to investigate. I think that there is an onus on every councillor from every party to ensure that there are audit committees in every council. That is up to elected members. Therefore, I agree with the two members who spoke previously.

Mr Buchanan: I should have declared an interest.

Mr McGlone: As an auditor?

Mr Buchanan: No, as a councillor.

The Chairperson: Given your previous comment, I will allow you to declare that interest, Mr Buchanan.

Mr McGlone: There is a need for a further point of clarity. I listened carefully to Peter's points. We all know that councillors have a responsibility and a role to play. However, we also know that, on some occasions, when the chips were down at councils, block votes were used to decide whether something should or should not be an issue. We do not need to go into which councils did that.

Mr W Clarke: Those councils could be brought to the auditor.

Mr McGlone: That brings me to the very point that I was making, Willie. The effectiveness of the audit process and the kick-in should be almost instantaneous where there is power. That seems to be missing, and there is a weakness in the system that is not allowing for that type of process to kick in.

The Chairperson: We are going through the Bill, and this discussion is outside its remit. The Committee has discussed these provisions already and is content with them. Some very valid points have been raised, but clause 3(2) states: "A council, before the prescribed date in each year –

(a) shall consider the estimates for the next financial year;

(b) may revise the estimates in such manner as the council thinks fit;".

Enough mechanisms are in that subsection, and the reports should be made to local councils.

I know that there have been bad practices in the past, but, as a result of the Bill, councillors and financial officers will need to hold people to account and bring proper budgets and budget statements to councils. That is what is behind the idea of someone's being a financial officer. We have all sat on councils and know how the processes work. Mr Clarke made a valid point; although councils do not have accounts committees, they have scrutiny committees. Questions need to be asked.

The Committee was content with this clause a couple of weeks ago. I am going to put the Question, and members can decide whether they want to make a decision, come back to the clause or ask Julie and her team for more detail. Perhaps we could ask the Department to find out whether there is any way in which the audit process could be strengthened.

Ms Broadway: We can take that point to the Minister and tell him that the Committee has recommended that a review of the audit process be carried out to see whether we need to make changes to the audit provisions.

The Chairperson: Are members happy enough to go down that route?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Reserves – general)

The Chairperson: I remind members that the Department was asked to clarify whether regulations would provide sufficient flexibility for councils to accumulate reserves for medium and long-term objectives. The Department advised that it does not plan to impose any control on reserves and that it will be for each council to decide its level of reserves. Members indicated previously that they were content with the Department's response to that matter.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 (Controlled reserves)

The Chairperson: I remind members that several respondents were not in favour of designation of any reserves as controlled reserves. They considered that the departmental guidance of maintaining a minimum district fund balance equating to between 5% and 7.5% of the net operating expenditure to be a sufficient control.

The Department advised that it does not plan to impose any control on reserves. That power would be used only if the Department became aware that a council was deemed to be acting improperly, and the creation of regulations under the clause would be subject to negative resolution.

I remind members that concerns were expressed that the Department would be able to act only retrospectively should irregular and improper expenditure be undertaken by a council and that the legislation would not prevent irregular actions occurring but would deal only with the consequences after such actions. The Department advised that it regards the current system of governance, along with the new controls proposed in the Bill, as sufficient.

Basically, councils have that 5% to 7.5% reserve at present, and the proposal is that that should be retained. Is that correct?

Mr Small: We are not changing that position, and it was purely voluntary anyway. It would be contrary to the whole concept of the Bill if we were to impose things. It is purely guidance.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Is the Committee therefore content?

Mr Weir: If the indication is that, if a voluntary scheme were being followed and advice could be given on that, is the issue not about whether clause 7 is actually unnecessary?

Mr Small: For information, the provisions would apply in a serious situation where problems arise. They would be used only in an extreme situation.

The Chairperson: Peter, did you want to come back on that?

Mr Weir: No.

The Chairperson: The question is whether the Committee feels that the clause is needed. After hearing that clarification, do you feel that it is needed?

Mr Weir: Yes, I can live with it. I am just saying that I know that concerns were raised.

The Committee Clerk: We looked into this further, and we asked about what happens in England where a similar provision is in place. That has never been enacted, but it is there in case of an emergency.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (The general fund)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised on this clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Power to establish other funds)

The Chairperson: I remind members that clarification was sought from the Department that funds established under this clause would not be treated as controlled reserves. The Department has confirmed that it does not plan to impose any control on the reserves. Members were previously content with the Department's response on the matter.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Limitation on application of funds)

The Chairperson: I remind members that no issues were raised about clause 10.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 10 agreed to.

Clause 11 (Power to borrow)

The Chairperson: I remind members that guidance was sought from the Department on borrowing. The Department advised that subordinate legislation under this Bill, that is, the proposed capital finance and accounting regulations, would impose a duty on councils to have regard to the CIPFA prudential code for capital finance in local authorities. That code sets out clear governance procedures for the production of capital investment plans that are affordable, prudent and sustainable. A copy of these draft regulations has been provided to members. I remind members that they previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Control of borrowing)

The Chairperson: I remind members that clarification was sought from the Department as to whether there would be a stated requirement for the chief financial officer to report to the council on the review of the borrowing limit. The Department confirmed that adherence to the prudential code requires a chief financial officer to review the council's borrowing limit and to report to the council. Clause 13 also addresses that concern. I remind members that they previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response on the matter.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Duty to determine affordable borrowing limit)

The Chairperson: I remind members that no issues were raised on the clause and that members were previously content with it.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 13 agreed to.

Clause 14 (Imposition of borrowing limits)

The Chairperson: I remind members that there were two issues with this clause. First, clarification was sought from the Department that borrowing limits would be imposed only if a council had disregarded its duty under clause 13. The Department confirmed that that power would be used only if it became aware that a council had been deemed to be acting imprudently.

Secondly, some respondents sought a definition of the term "national economic reasons". The Department contended that providing such a fixed definition would be impracticable and that such a power was intended to be used as a last resort and would require the consent of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). The Department advised that there would be no requirement for regulations under that power to be consulted on. A copy of the Department's response has been provided for members in a letter dated 8 November 2010.

I remind members that they previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response to both those issues.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 14 agreed to.

Clause 15 (Temporary borrowing)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised about the clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 15 agreed to.

Clause 16 (Protection of lenders)

The Chairperson: I remind members that no issues were raised about the clause and that members were previously content with it.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 16 agreed to.

Clause 17 ("Credit arrangements")

The Chairperson: I remind members that two issues were raised about this clause. First, clarification was sought from the Department that trade creditors would be excluded from the definition of a credit arrangement. The Department confirmed that trade creditors would be excluded in relation to long-term finance, presuming that they are paid within a 12-month calendar period.

Secondly, clarification was sought from the Department on whether the long-term liabilities connected to the closure and aftercare costs associated with landfill sites would be treated as credit arrangements. The Department advised that those costs would need to be provided for within the annual budget. The costs would be divided between capital costs, which are for putting in the infrastructure that is needed to treat the products of a landfill site after it has been closed, as well as the revenue costs for operating and maintaining that.

A credit arrangement could be entered into for capital costs. That would be for installing the equipment that is required, and the council would need to take that into account as part of its overall implementation expenditure.

I remind members that that they were content with the departmental response to both those issues.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 17 agreed to.

Clause 18 (Control of credit arrangements)

The Chairperson: I remind members that there were no issues with clause 18.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 18 agreed to.

Clause 19 ("Capital expenditure")

The Chairperson: No issues were raised with clause 19.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 19 agreed to.

Clause 20 ("Capital receipt")

The Chairperson: No issues were raised about the clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 20 agreed to.

Clause 21 (Non-money receipts)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised about the clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 21 agreed to.

Clause 22 (Use of capital receipts)

The Chairperson: I remind members that clarification was sought from the Department that there should not be a requirement for capital receipts to be applied in the first instance against any money borrowed by the council for the purposes of acquiring the asset in question. The Department confirmed that there will be no such requirement and advised that subordinate legislation that will be made under the Bill, that is, the capital financing and accounting regulations, will provide detail on the use of capital receipts.

A copy of the draft regulations has been provided. However, I remind members that they previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response to this matter. Is the Committee content with clause 22?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 22 agreed to.

Clause 23 (Power to invest)

The Chairperson: I remind members that guidance was sought from the Department

about investments. In response, the Department compiled draft guidance on investments for the councils, which will be issued under this Bill.

The Department also referred to the investment guidance in the CIPFA prudential code, which will apply to all local councils once the Bill is enacted. Members have been provided with a copy of the draft guidance. I remind members that they previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 23 agreed to.

Clause 24 (Security for money borrowed, etc.)

The Chairperson: I remind members that the Committee, on the advice of the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules, sought an amendment to clause 24 about the appointment of a receiver where unpaid council borrowings are concerned. The clause states that a receiver can be appointed if the borrowings are not less than £10,000. It also states that the Department can amend that amount. The Committee sought that any amendment to this amount should be subject to draft affirmative procedure so that this Committee can subject it to a higher degree of Assembly scrutiny. The Department's draft amendment has been provided in a letter dated 8 November 2010. I refer that to members before I put the Question.

Is the Committee content with clause 24, subject to the amendment proposed by the Department to make orders under subsection 9 subject to draft affirmative procedure, which gives the Committee a higher level of scrutiny?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 24, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 25 (Guidance)

The Chairperson: I remind members that there are no issues with clause 25.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 25 agreed to.

Clause 26 (De-rating grant)

The Chairperson: I remind members that there are no issues with clause 26.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 26 agreed to.

Clause 27 (Rates support grant)

The Chairperson: There are some issues with this clause. I advise members that the Department intends to table two amendments to clause 27 at Consideration Stage. The first amendment will give the Department power to request the necessary information by determination, rather than by statutory pro forma. The other amendment is consequential to a proposed amendment to clause 43, which relates to incidental, supplementary, consequential, transitory or saving provisions. However, we will deal with that later.

I inform members that a copy of the Department's first proposed amendment has been provided in a letter dated 22 November 2010. The second of the Department's proposed amendments has also been provided in a letter dated 8 November.

I remind members that stakeholders raised two issues under this clause. First, clarification is sought from the Department that the formula for the allocation of the rates support grant, formerly the resources grant, would be reviewed after the review of public administration. The Department confirmed that the central statistics and research branch carries out an equality monitoring exercise every year. Secondly, it was considered that the rates support grant should be ring-fenced to prevent in-year cuts. The Department advises that such cuts, as occurred previously, were unique and exceptional and that future similar in-year cuts could not be ruled out due to greater budgetary pressures.

I inform members that correspondence from the Association of Local Government Finance Officers regarding the need to ring-fence the rates support grant is provided. A draft Committee amendment to the clause is also provided. That amendment will ensure that rates support grants, once set, will not be cut within a financial year.

I advise members that I will put the Question on the clause. There will be an opportunity to discuss clause 43, which requires a consequential amendment. One of the two amendments is a request to ring-fence money, which the Committee agreed, and the other is a departmental amendment.

Ms Broadway: There are two departmental amendments. One amendment will omit clause 27(5)(c) and add in a subsection (9A) after clause 27(9). That is being done for administrative reasons. The current regulations on rates support grant require councils to provide information to allow for the calculation of the grant to be provided by a pro forma. However, at times, the pro forma can change as a result of purely technical accounting issues. Those issues do not affect the calculation of the grant or the formula, but they may relate to categories such as depreciation, for example. The information is currently provided in a pro forma table.

It would mean that, if we wanted to make those technical amendments, we would have to bring draft affirmative legislation to the Assembly to get it to debate issues that are basically administrative. Therefore, the proposed amendment would allow us to seek that information by departmental determination whereby we would write to councils to tell them the information that we need to allow us to make the calculation. That would be done rather than their having to fill in a pro forma.

Mr Small: Those matters are largely outwith our control. We would have to make CIPFA-type accounting practice changes to make the whole process fit in with the latest accounting procedures. It is not something that we would wish to do; it is something that would be forced upon us.

Ms Broadway: I reiterate that it does not change the elements or the calculation of the formula. If any amendments were needed, draft affirmative legislation would be required to be brought before the Committee and the Assembly.

The Chairperson: If members are happy with that explanation, I will ask whether you agree with the departmental amendments to give the Department powers to request the necessary information for calculating the rates support grant from councils by determination rather than by pro forma.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I beg to move

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 9, line 26, at end insert

“and shall not be reduced during the financial year in question”

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department’s proposed amendments and the Committee’s proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Mr Weir: I thought that the departmental officials would want to say something at this stage.

Mr Small: I appreciate that, Mr Weir. We had a discussion about the matter, and we were uncomfortable with it. The Committee will be aware of the Department’s lack of flexibility, despite the fact that the budget is reasonable. Eighteen million pounds is a big element of that. That amendment would restrict the Department’s position for this year and next year. That is not something that will be taken lightly, and the Minister was very reluctant to make such a cut. He understands the difficulties that a negative adjustment or, as you might say, a reduction, during the year, will mean to councils. We are uncomfortable with that amendment, but the Committee has a decision to make.

The Chairperson: I think that the Committee has made its decision. However, we have not agreed the consequential amendment, because, before we do, we have to go to clause 43. In principle, members are saying yes. Are you happy with that, Mr Weir?

Mr Weir: I understand the logic of the amendment, but I also understand the Department’s position.

The Chairperson: I will come back to that clause.

Clause 27 referred for further consideration.

Clause 28 (Reductions in grants under section 26 or 27)

The Chairperson: I remind members that there are no issues with clause 28.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 28 agreed to.

Clause 29 (Other grants to councils)

The Chairperson: I remind members that there are no issues with clause 29.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 29 agreed to.

Clause 30 (Payments due by councils to departments, etc.)

The Chairperson: I remind members that it was suggested that an early warning system for payments due by councils to Departments be introduced. The Department advised that it will undertake to provide notification as early as possible to any council affected by the invoking of clause 30. Members have a copy of the Department's response in a letter dated 8 November.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 30 agreed to.

Clause 31 (Allowances, etc. for councillors)

The Chairperson: I remind members that clarification was sought from the Department that payments must be flexible to accommodate those who wish to make a career from local government and for those who wish to take a position on a part-time basis. The Department confirmed that the basic allowance will be the same for all councils, but councils will have flexibility on payments of special responsibility allowances. I remind members that they previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 31 agreed to.

Clause 32 (Allowances for chairman and vice-chairman)

The Chairperson: I remind members that clarification was sought from the Department on the financial transparency of officers in councils. The Department confirmed that the remuneration of senior officers of council should be reported in a council's annual statement of accounts. Members previously indicated that they were content with the Department's

response, and I remind them that they raised the issue of the gender of the terms that are used in this clause. The Department indicated that such terms are used in clauses 32 and 39 because they refer to the offices of chairman and vice-chairman, established under section 11 and 13 of the Local Government Act (NI) 1972. The Department has provided a letter dated 22 November. The letter contains draft amendments to make clause 32 gender neutral.

Should the clause be amended with the general neutral terms "chairperson" and "vice-chairperson"?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 32, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 33 (Expenses of official and courtesy visits, etc.)

The Chairperson: I remind members that no issues were raised under clause 33.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 33 agreed to.

Clause 34 (Expenses incurred in attending conferences and meetings)

The Chairperson: I remind members that the Department has removed some of the restrictions on the payment of expenses to councils under this clause in response to the concerns of the National Association of Councillors (NAC) that attendance at meetings of its organisation would not be covered. It will now largely be a matter for each council to decide whether attendance at a conference relates to the interests of the district. Members have been provided with copies of the comments from the NAC.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 34 agreed to.

Clause 35 (Panel to advise on payments to councillors)

The Chairperson: I remind members that concerns were expressed regarding the cost associated with the establishment and running of the independent panel to establish councillor payments. The Department advised that those costs will be met by the Department and will not necessarily be incurred every year. Department has provided further detail on the estimated costs of the remuneration panel, which has been provided for members in a letter dated 8 November. The Committee had issue with the costs and, therefore, we need to be very careful. We understand the reason for the panel; however, there are concerns about the cost.

Ms Broadway: The Minister will set up the panel only when he requires a review to be carried out. It is not the case that as soon as the Bill becomes an Act we will be setting up the panel. It will be set up only when the Minister decides that he wishes a review to be carried out. Furthermore, the panel will do only that which the Minister asks it to do. For instance, if the Minister wanted a full review of councillors' remuneration, the panel would be set up to do that. However, the Minister may choose to carry out a targeted review on certain aspects of remuneration. The panel would be paid only for the days on which it sat. A panel set up for 12 months would not be paid for the whole 12 months; it would be paid only for the days on which it sat.

The Chairperson: Therefore discussions are not likely to take place in the south of France. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: If they did, we would have to go there to give evidence. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with the clause?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 35 agreed to.

Clause 36 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: Further detail was sought from the Department on a non-councillor receiving expenses. The Department advised that such expenses may be authorised by the council to cover attendance by non-councillors

at conferences or meetings that relate to the interests of the district, where such non-councillors would attend on account of their professional expertise or as representatives of external stakeholders.

Ms Broadway: That will mostly be used in town-twinning cases.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with the clause?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 36 agreed to.

Clause 37 (Payments for special purposes)

The Chairperson: Clarification was sought from the Department on the review of the current limits of expenditure for special purposes. The Department advised that, if necessary, it can increase those limits under subordinate legislation. The Committee sought research on existing limits in councils and examples of expenditure made for special purposes. A copy of that research has been provided for members. I remind members that they previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response on the matter.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 37 agreed to.

Clause 38 (Restrictions on power to make payments under section 37)

The Chairperson: I remind members that some respondents to the Committee sought an amendment to the clause so that it would read: "a council shall not make payments under section 37 unless, in its opinion, the direct benefit accruing".

The Department advised that that amendment is unnecessary, as clause 38 is subject to clause 37, which already gives councils discretion as to whether a payment is for a purpose that would bring direct benefit to the council. Are we happy with that clarification? Members previously indicated that they were content with the Department's response.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 38 agreed to.

Clause 39 (public appeals)

The Chairperson: I remind members that some respondents to the Committee sought an amendment to the clause to replace the words “particular event” with the word “circumstances”. The Department is not minded to amend the clause, as the provision is to allow councils to make one-off payments associated with particular events rather than regular payment to causes in general. Members previously indicated that they were content with the Department’s response. I also remind members that, as in clause 32, gender-specific language has been used. Members have been provided with a draft departmental amendment in a letter dated 22 November, which introduces gender-neutral language to the clause. Do members feel that the clause should be amended with the gender-neutral terms “chairperson” and “vice-chairperson”?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department’s proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 39, subject to the Department’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 40 (Limit on expenditure under sections 37 and 39)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised with clause 40.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 40 agreed to.

Clause 41 (Subscriptions to certain local government associations and other bodies)

The Chairperson: I remind members that concerns were expressed that public funds would be used to pay for an officer of a council to be a member of a professional body associated with their job, where membership of that body was a requirement to attain the post at the outset. The Committee sought research on existing practices in councils. That research has been provided. The Department also contacted councils, 10 of which responded with a composite list of 91 bodies of which

council officials are members. A copy of that information is provided in a letter dated 8 November. We did not see that information until today. Are members content with the departmental response?

Mr McGlone: What information has only been seen today?

The Committee Clerk: The research indicating the bodies that councils pay for their staff to be members of, and the letter from the Department dated 8 November.

The Chairperson: Members have that information in tabs 4.9 and 4.4 of their packs?

Mr McGlone: Which — 4.9 or 4.4?

The Committee Clerk: Both. The research is at tab 4.9; the letter from the Department is at tab 4.4. It is the first of two letters in that tab.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with the clause?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 41 agreed to.

Clause 42 (General interpretation)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised with the clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 42 agreed to.

Clause 43 (Regulations)

The Chairperson: I advise members that the Department intends to table an amendment to clause 43 to allow any regulations to be made under the Bill to include such incidental, supplementary, consequential, transitory or saving provisions as may be considered necessary. Such a power is usual in any Bill. A copy of the Department’s draft amendment is in members’ information packs. The Examiner of Statutory Rules is content with the amendment.

Is the Committee content with clause 43, subject to the amendment proposed by the Department to allow any regulations to be made under the Bill to include such incidental, supplementary, consequential, transitory or saving provisions as may be considered necessary?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 43, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 27 (Rates support grant)

The Chairperson: Having considered clause 43, I ask members to reconsider formally clause 27, which the Department proposes to amend as a consequence of the amendment to clause 43. The proposed departmental amendment would remove lines 40 and 41 from subsection 8, as they are no longer needed if the Department's amendment allows general provisions to apply to all regulations under the Bill.

Members agreed to a departmental amendment to give the Department powers to request the necessary information for determining the rates support grant by determination rather than by pro forma, and a Committee amendment to prevent the Department from making in-year cuts to the rates support grant.

Is the Committee content to accept the proposed departmental consequential amendment to clause 27 as a consequence of its amendment to clause 43?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with clause 27, subject to the amendment proposed by the Department as a consequence of its amendment to clause 43 to request information by determination and by the Committee to prevent in-year cuts to the rates support grant?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendments and the Committee's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 27, subject to the Department's proposed amendments and the Committee's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 44 (Consultation on regulations, orders and guidance)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised under clause 44.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 44 agreed to.

Clause 45 (Minor and consequential amendments)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised under clause 45.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 45 agreed to.

Clause 46 (Repeals)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised under clause 46, and members were previously content with the clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 46 agreed to.

Clause 47 (Commencement)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised under clause 47.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 47 agreed to.

Clause 48 (Short title)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised under clause 48.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 48 agreed to.

Schedule 1 (Minor and consequential amendments)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised under schedule 1, and members were previously content with the schedule. However, the Committee has been provided with a proposed departmental amendment to add an additional statutory instrument to the schedule of minor and consequential amendments.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 1, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedule 1, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Repeals)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised under schedule 2.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 2, put and agreed to.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the long title of the Bill, put and agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: That concludes the formal clause-by-clause Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Finance) Bill. A Committee report will be brought to the Committee in the next couple of weeks.

Mr B Wilson: I apologise for my lateness and declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council.

The Chairperson: Accepted.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

30 November 2010

Welfare of Animals Bill (NIA 28/09)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr Simpson Gibson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Savage

Witnesses:

Ms Kate Davey	
Mr Andrew Kell	<i>Department of</i>
Mr Paddy McGuckian	<i>Agriculture and</i>
Ms Colette McMaster	<i>Rural Development</i>

The Chairperson (Mr Moutray): We continue with the scrutiny of the Welfare of Animals Bill. I remind members that only the policy associated with the Committee amendment to clause 6 will be considered at this stage as the Department has not confirmed whether it wishes to introduce the original clause, its first proposed amendment, or the further amendment that was presented at the last meeting.

Clause 1 (Animals to which this Act applies)

The Chairperson: The Department has agreed to amend clause 1 to make subsection (3), by means of clause 55, subject to affirmative resolution in line with similar legislation in England and Scotland. This issue will also be considered, therefore, at clause 55(2).

Question, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content with clause 1 as drafted, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clauses 2 to 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 (Prohibited procedures)

The Chairperson: There were two issues in respect of this clause. First, since the Bill was published, the Department has received a number of requests to clarify which routine farming procedures would be permitted to be carried out. Secondly, members were concerned that the clause had a consequential impact to clause 6 in that, as originally proposed, tail docking would have become a prohibited procedure.

On the first point, members agreed that it would be beneficial to set out in subordinate legislation the routine farming procedures currently permitted and that will continue to be permitted when the Bill is enacted. Therefore, clause 5 needs to be amended to reflect that the Department will bring forward subordinate legislation or regulations that will list the procedures that remain permitted. That will result in schedule 1 to the Bill being replaced, and members indicated that they are content with that. I will put the question on that matter when members consider that schedule.

The second issue is whether there is a consequential impact to clause 6 in that tail docking would become a prohibited procedure. I advise Members that that is not the case, as subsection (7) of the amended clause 5 reads as follows:

"Nothing in this section applies to the removal of the whole or part of a dog's tail (which is dealt with in section 6)".

Question, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content with clause 5 subject to the amendment recommended by the Committee and agreed by the Department, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Docking of dogs' tails)

The Chairperson: I will bring in the Committee Clerk at this point.

The Committee Clerk: As members will be aware, the Committee agreed last week to amend clause 6 to specify various types and breeds of dog for tail docking. In conjunction with that, members wanted to see the paper that was tabled by the Department and the

Minister a couple of weeks ago on subordinate legislation. For members' information, we have tabled a draft sample of clause 6, and we require members to confirm that they are content with the policy as contained in the clause.

The draft clause is an amalgam of the Bill as presented, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Docking of Working Dogs' Tails (England) Regulations 2007. Subsections (1) and (2) indicate that it is an offence to remove the whole or part of a dog's tail and that a person commits the offence if that person is responsible for the dog or if another person removes the whole or any part of a dog's tail. That is required to protect against cosmetic docking of a dog's tail.

Subsection (3) allows an exemption for working-types, stating that:

"A person does not commit an offence under subsection (1) or (2) if the whole or any part of a dog's tail is removed —

(a) by a veterinary surgeon for the purpose of medical treatment; or

(b) in order to prevent or remove an immediate danger to the life of the dog in circumstances where it is not reasonably practicable to have the tail, or, as the case may be, any part of the tail, removed by a veterinary surgeon."

Subsection (4) states that subsections (1) and (2) do not apply to dogs that are certified working dogs not more than five days old. Subsection (5) indicates that the dog will have to be certified as a working dog by a veterinary surgeon. Subsection (6) provides exemptions in respect of law enforcement activities of the armed forces, lawful pest control, or the lawful shooting of animals.

Subsections (7) and (8) create various offences under the clause. Under subsection (8), a person commits an offence if he owns a dog and fails to take reasonable steps to secure, before that dog is eight weeks old, that it is a certified exempted dog. There has been a slight change in that the timeline for that would normally have been three months. That is now down to eight weeks. After discussions that we had with the Department, the certification that the Department proposes comes in two stages; the first before the five days, and the second would normally have been completed after the pup was three months old. There was a concern that the second part would not be carried out due to the fact that the animal may well have been with an owner by that stage.

To ensure that the breeder is responsible for both sections of the certification, it is proposed that the period be reduced to eight weeks. In normal circumstances, the pup would still be getting weaned at that stage, so it would require the breeding establishment to carry out the certification. The remaining subsections are a direct lift from the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

There is then a draft schedule in members' papers. We have to confirm with the Bill Office that the best route for introducing the exemption is through a schedule attached to the Bill, or through subordinate legislation, which would ultimately be brought by the Department. In either case, the specification is lifted from the Docking of Working Dogs' Tails (England) Regulations 2007. The specified types of dogs are hunt point retrieve breeds of any type or combination of types, spaniels of any type or combination of types, and terriers of any type or combination of types.

The Chairperson: I seek members' approval on the policy of the clause, and ask that the Committee Clerk liaises with the Bill Office for an amendment to be considered. I therefore seek approval to defer scrutiny of the clause until a substantive amendment is available to the Committee.

Members indicated assent.

Clause 6 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 7 to 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Licensing or registration of activities involving animals)

The Chairperson: Members expressed concern that breeding establishments would not come under the aegis of the Department but would be a function enforced, as it is currently, by local councils. Members gained some assurance from the fact that resourcing the licensing of breeding establishments would be undertaken on a full-cost-recovery basis thus ensuring that local government would not be burdened by additional resource implications. In addition, members expressed that they were content with that area being the first to receive subordinate legislation in order to have stricter regulation of breeding establishments.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 12, put and agreed to.

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clauses 13 to 15 agreed to.

Clause 16 (Codes of practice)

The Chairperson: It has been the norm for the Department to commit to submitting codes of practice to the Committee for scrutiny in advance of publishing them. During the evidence sessions, the Department confirmed that any new draft codes will be subject to the consultation process and to scrutiny by the Committee.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 16, put and agreed to.

Clause 16 agreed to.

Clause 17 (Powers in relation to animals in distress)

The Chairperson: Members have had concerns surrounding the financial impact of this clause and clause 29 on local councils. However, clauses 17 and 29 cannot be empowered until clause 45 is approved. Although it is somewhat out of sync, I would like to discuss clause 45 as that will cast some light on clauses 17 and 29.

Clause 17 refers to an “inspector” or “constable”. Although the term “constable” is defined earlier in the Bill, the appointment of inspectors does not occur until clause 45, which states:

“45.—(1) In this Act, ‘inspector’, in the context of any provision, means a person appointed to be an inspector for the purposes of that provision by—

- (a) the Department; or
- (b) a council.”

However, members have expressed concerns about the financial implications of the two clauses on councils and have called for them to be made dormant to allow for further consultation with the Department and councils. The Minister, content that such consultation is required, has proposed an amendment to clause 45, which reads:

“45.—(1) In this Act, ‘inspector’, in the context of any provisions, means—

- (a) in so far as that provision relates to farmed animals, a person appointed to be an inspector for the purposes of that provision by the Department;
- (b) in so far as that provision relates to other animals, a person appointed to be an inspector for the purposes of that provision by a council.”

The proposed amendment distinguishes between the appointment of inspectors in respect of farmed and non-farmed animals.

The Bill replaces the 1972 Order. It is therefore essential that the Department empowers the ability to inspect farmed animals in respect of, for example, TB, brucellosis and other diseases. That will be achieved through the proposed amendment to clause 45(1)(a). Understandably, the Department is intent on enforcing that part of the clause immediately.

Clause 45(1)(b) empowers inspectors to undertake the proposed responsibilities delegated under clauses 17 and 29 of the Bill. The Minister originally suggested that those clauses might not be commenced until further consultation with elected council representatives has been undertaken. The Committee has suggested that that period is not less than 12 months.

If members are content, I will put the following question: that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content with clause 17, subject, first, to the amendment recommended for clause 45 by the Committee and agreed by the Department and, secondly, to confirmation by the Minister that clause 45(1)(b) will not be commenced for a period not less than 12 months.

Mr Molloy: To clarify the matter with respect to the inspector of farmed animals, this Bill is not dealing with farmed animals. The Department, obviously, appoints its inspectors at present. Why is that provision being added here?

The Committee Clerk: The amendment that the Department has brought forward will remove the appointment of inspectors that is defined in the 1972 Act. Therefore, the Department has to re-empower itself, and it does so at clause 45(1)(a). There is a concern that if the entire clause were made dormant, the Department would not be in a position to appoint those inspectors.

Mr Molloy: On that same line, the legislation that we are dealing with relates to all non-farmed animals, but if the Department needs legislation in relation to farmed animals, the danger is that it will give itself the authority to appoint inspectors who will inspect non-farmed animals.

The Chairperson: On that point, will the departmental officials come forward please? Perhaps they can shed some light on that issue. You are very welcome.

Ms Colette McMaster (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): The Welfare of Animals Bill provides new powers in respect of non-farmed animals. It also provides powers in respect of farmed animals, as it replaces the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. The Bill introduces powers that will apply to all animals, farmed and non-farmed. The definition of “animal” in the Bill is “a vertebrate other than man”. Therefore, it refers to all vertebrate animals.

The powers in the Bill will apply to all those animals. The enactment of the Bill will replace the existing legislation, which will then fall. The existing powers of the Department to enforce welfare provisions will go when the existing legislation falls, and we will rely on the new piece of legislation to provide the powers to enforce welfare in respect of farmed and non-farmed animals.

Ms Kate Davey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): As Colette said, we already have those powers, but they are very much under the 1972 Act and the welfare of farmed animals legislation, which is underpinned by the 1972 Act. Therefore, once that is taken away, we will not have those powers. The only additional power that the Bill is giving in respect of farmed animals is that it allows the Department the power of seizure. Currently that power of seizure is held only by the police. That is the legislative basis to allow us to continue to do what we currently do. The only additional piece is the power for the Department to seize animals, as opposed to only the police having that power to seize.

Mr Molloy: This is a very late stage for the Department to give clarification of that. All along, the issue has been around non-farmed animals. The new power of seizure has not been debated. When we talked about the seizure of dogs, the matter of who will have authority in that situation did not come into it. However, at this very late stage, the Department is saying that if we move from the 1972 Act, it will have no authority whatsoever. Are we getting a muddle of legislation being put together and some sleight of hand to give the Department power over something that has not been clarified up to now?

The Chairperson: Do you want to come back on that issue?

Ms McMaster: This is the Bill as it was introduced. That policy was in the Bill when it was cleared by

the Executive and introduced in the Assembly. This is not something that has been introduced at a late stage; it has been there from the outset. When the Minister introduced it in the Assembly, she was very clear that it was replacing the existing legislation.

Mr Molloy: My point is that when we were discussing animal welfare and the docking of dog's tails, we were told all along that this was nothing to do with farmed animals. When I made the comparison between farmed animals and dogs, I was told that this was not about farmed animals, but about dogs and non-farmed animals. The debate was about why something could be done to a pig or a lamb but not to a dog, and that the two were completely separate.

Ms Davey: No. That was not what you were told. We have said from the outset and in numerous presentations that the Welfare of Animals Bill replaces the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. The Bill gives us the same powers for farmed animals. The new element is that the Bill gives us similar powers to deal with non-farmed animals. We have not said that it is not about farmed animals. The only difference is that the Bill gives us a power of seizure, which currently rests with the police. I take the point about lambs' tails and pigs' tails, but we have said that clause 6 affects only dogs. The powers in the Bill allow us to look after the welfare of all vertebrate animals. At this point, we have not looked at docking lambs' or pigs' tails, because husbandry systems are being put in place to improve that. It is not the case that the Bill does not have power in that regard; that may happen in the future.

Mr Molloy: During a previous meeting you said that you were considering that power.

Ms Davey: I said that it was something that could be considered in the future if the proper systems were in place and the farming industry were ready for that.

Mr Molloy: The introduction of that power is a possibility.

Ms Davey: The Bill does not introduce the power. It provides powers to ensure the welfare of animals. Any other powers would be introduced through subordinate legislation, which the Committee would scrutinise.

Mr Molloy: We started off by discussing the cost to councils. If the Department has, through

legislation, the power to appoint inspectors, surely it can direct those inspectors to ensure the welfare of all animals, whether farmed or non-farmed, instead of putting an extra burden on councils.

Ms McMaster: We proposed that councils carry out an enforcement role in relation to non-farmed animals for a number of reasons. It strengthens the role of councils, which have existing skills in that area. We spoke to representatives of some of the enforcement areas in GB, who told us that the vast majority of non-farmed animal welfare cases that they deal with concern cats and dogs. Council staff already have complementary skills and experience to draw on in dealing with dogs and other non-farmed animals. Councils are well placed to deliver those services to communities in urban and rural areas. It will be an opportunity to build and strengthen councils. Additional funding of up to £2 million could potentially go to councils as a result of this.

Mr Molloy: The Minister is prepared to give a firm commitment to provide £760,000 a year in this financial term. However, the Minister's term ends in May, so the guarantee to councils only lasts until then. The Committee has been told that it will be advised of any proposed change in funding. It is of little benefit to local government that the Committee will be advised that councils will lose money. In fact, it will become the cushion for the Department to tell the Committee about it. I do not think that that, in any way, secures the funding for local government.

We have been talking about the appointment of inspectors even though there is no commitment about who will fund those inspectors in the medium-to-long term. There has not been proper consultation with local government on that situation up to now. I declare an interest as a member of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, which has still not been consulted. The idea that the Department will not have any cover because the Act will have changed is incorrect. If this were deferred, the present legislation would continue until the new Act comes into place.

Ms Davey: Elements of it will certainly continue, but the key point is that the Department will not have powers of seizure in respect of animals in distress. Therefore, it is about trying to move the legislation on farmed animals forward rather than letting it sit where it is. We are

trying to progress the whole animal welfare provision, and the Minister has already given a commitment, which has been re-emphasised a number of times, that we will carry out a full consultation with the councils to take the provisions on non-farmed animals forward to try to get the benefits as quickly as possible for those animals.

Mr Molloy: On the basis that the proposed revised clause 45 will remove the legal power that the Department has, surely, we should defer everything until the matter is clarified? The Department is asking the Committee to approve the appointment and enforcement provisions without any real consultation on what enforcement will mean. That is a new power that the Department is taking on itself. We asked a number of times whether the Department will carry out enforcement itself, whether it will hire it off to someone else in the future or whether it will appoint someone to do it. We have not had clarification on that.

Ms Davey: The Department will take forward the appointment of inspectors as it does for farmed animals currently. That will continue under the Bill. In the Minister's letter to the Committee, she says that she is prepared to leave clause 45(1)(b) so that it will not commence until 12 months after Royal Assent. That leaves 12 months in which councils will not have any involvement in the Bill. That will allow consultation and implementation arrangements to be put in place and will allow the Department to continue to work with the new legislation and to enforce any new powers with respect to farmed animals.

Mr Molloy: We do not have to defer the consultation until the Bill is in place or even until the 12-month period afterwards. By this point, we have not seen any change in the Department's attitude towards consultation with local government.

Ms McMaster: The Minister has made that commitment, and she has given a guarantee to the Committee.

Mr Molloy: It has not started.

Ms McMaster: There has been some consultation previously, and we have re-engaged with the councils in recent weeks and had meetings with various representatives of councils and with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). We have undertaken to continue

those meetings with representatives of the councils, including the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). We asked NILGA to advise us of its availability to meet with DARD officials as soon as possible, and we have asked the chairperson of the NILGA rural affairs committee to attend that meeting. We are committed to doing that immediately and to continuing that engagement.

The Minister has made a firm commitment that officials will engage with council representatives and provide practical assistance to help council officials prepare for the new enforcement role on non-farmed animals. She has given a guarantee that councils will be given time to prepare for their enforcement role before powers for councils to appoint inspectors are commenced.

She has agreed that clause 45(1)(b) will not be commenced until 12 months after Royal Assent, at which time it will be introduced by commencement order, unless councils advise that they are in a position to start implementation earlier than that. The Minister has made a number of guarantees, and she has reaffirmed those so that the Department will be working with councils to help them prepare for enforcement.

Mr Molloy: My understanding is that we have not had any guarantee, except that councils will not have to take action until 12 months after the legislation is passed. I thought that we were thinking about the legislation being approved by councils before we pass it. I did not envisage that, once the Bill was enacted, there would be a period of time for councils to organise themselves to implement it. The issue should be whether councils will or will not take on that role; not that we pass the legislation now and give it 12 months to come into operation, after which enforcement will transfer to councils.

Ms McMaster: In recent weeks, we have re-engaged with council officials and representatives, and they have said that they want engagement with us to help to prepare.

Mr Molloy: We have been through this a number of times. The Department has not engaged with local government. It may have engaged with officials in local government and with NILGA officials, but it has not engaged with local government. To come here and say that councils want to do this and that is rubbish, because councils have not been asked, they have not

made a decision, and there has not been any discussion. Do not come here and tell us that councils have taken on, or want to take on, this issue, because it has not been discussed. It cannot be discussed until the councils decide on it, but too many officials like you take what other officials think to be what councils think. That is not the situation.

Ms McMaster: I am telling you what the officials have told us. We have sought a meeting with NILGA, and we are waiting for NILGA to give us dates for that meeting. We are committed to engaging closely with them over the next period.

Ms Davey: The policy was subject to Executive agreement before the Bill was introduced. Therefore, the Bill is being introduced based on Executive policy, which is that the Department will look after farmed animals and that councils will take forward a role in respect of non-farmed animals. That is where the Department's policy sits.

Mr Molloy: That brings us back to the original point. Why are we being asked to pass legislation on which the Department has power already? The power that it has not stressed that it wants is the power of seizure. We have seen the Department in action on the power of seizure, and it does not have a good record. Budgets are tight, but if the Department were to continue in the way that it has done, its budget might run out very quickly because of the compensation that it would have to pay.

Ms McMaster: We do not currently have powers of seizure. One of the new improvements that will result from the Bill is that the Department will have powers of seizure. We have been working without those powers to date.

Mr Molloy: We have to be careful on the powers of seizure, because we saw raids on farms and "inspections", as departmental officials called them. Officials now say that they have no powers to do that, and the Department has to pay out compensation in a number of situations. We need to be careful with the power of seizure being available to departmental officials.

Ms Davey: It might help if I clarify the current powers of seizure. The 1972 Act contains powers of seizure for farmed animals. Those powers are carried out by the police, with the presence of the Department's veterinary officials. The police act on behalf of the Department and do not see that as their role,

and that is why the Department is taking that power. I emphasise that powers of seizure are the last resort. The legislation is not about the Department seizing animals. As we set out previously to the Committee, we have the facility to issue improvement notices.

Improvement notices will be the first steps put in place when an animal is suffering or likely to suffer. The farmer — or owner, in the case of a non-farmed animal — will be given clear instructions and a timeline as to what he must do to improve the animal's conditions. The inspector will visit again. Seizure is something that we do not want to do. The Department has not had the police seize any farmed animals in years. Paddy can vouch for that.

Mr Paddy McGuckian (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): That is right.

Ms Davey: Seizure is not something that we try to do. We try to work with the owner to get the animals into a condition where they are healthy and well looked after. We do not want to seize animals. That is definitely the last resort. However, we have to have this power because there will be circumstances in which there will be no option other than to take the animals.

The Chairperson: Mr Molloy, are you comforted by the fact that seizure is a last-resort measure that has not been used for a considerable time?

Mr Molloy: I am not comfortable with this because of the history of the Department. I have concerns because of some of the farms on which that has happened. Furthermore, I am not that comfortable because this is the first that we have heard of this. That may be our fault as well, because we have not been raising this issue. The Department has not highlighted its role in seizure or in relation to farmed animals. Until now, we have been talking about non-farmed animals only. Farmed animals have only come in now in relation to the appointment of inspectors and giving the Department power in that. It has that at the moment to some extent, and it wants that power increased. That has not been highlighted.

Ms McMaster: Let me clarify. In our earlier presentations to the Committee, we set out an overview the Bill and the clauses in it, the implications of those clauses, what the powers meant, and how they would be used. We have done that for the Committee.

Ms Davey: We have clearly set out the powers of seizure. The discussion on seizure powers for farmed animals has already taken place at this Committee.

The Chairperson: Thank you for that.

Mr Irwin: I am a farmer. I do not wish to see animals seized, but, in the last resort, there may be occasions when that must happen. I see that a veterinary surgeon has to certify that an animal is suffering or is likely to suffer. Is that the Department's veterinary surgeon or an independent one?

Ms Davey: It depends whether we are exercising these powers in respect of farmed animals, in which case it would be the Department's veterinary surgeon. He would look at the animal and assess it.

Mr McGuckian: That is the way it would be.

The additional power that you have rightly highlighted is that where the animals are likely to suffer, we would be in a position to seize them. We have explained that before this Committee, and I concur with my colleagues on that. We have been through that process and explained how it would happen. You are quite correct. If animals are suffering or are likely to suffer, we would have power to seize them. However, we do not envisage having to do that often, because of the use of the improvement notices. We find that the improvement notices make all the difference in the vast majority of cases. It is a written notice that tells the owner that he or she has a problem and must fix it. If he or she does not fix it, he or she is at risk of losing the animals. That makes people sit up, waken up, acknowledge that they have a problem and take action.

The weakness in the existing legislation, as we have frequently explained, is that at the moment under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, we do not have the power to seize. The police will sometimes seize under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE). However, the police take the animal as evidence, they do not do so under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. The police can seize in situations where animals are in distress, but we have never been able to seize healthy animals that are likely to suffer. That issue has been raised by members of the public over and over again as a weakness in the

current legislation. We are trying to address that in this legislation.

Ms Davey: A set of circumstances might explain that for members. If we go into a situation on a farm where there are animals suffering, dying and dead on the farm, and there is another group of animals that are not at the stage of suffering, we have to walk away and leave the animals that are not suffering, knowing that, in two or three weeks' time, they will be suffering. Only when they suffer can action be taken.

The legislation is not about the Department wanting to seize animals, because, once we do that, those animals are exceptionally expensive to keep. Our Veterinary Service will work with farmers and their families to put arrangements in place to ensure that the animals are properly cared for on farms, so that we do not have to go down the road of seizure.

Mr Irwin: I am slightly concerned that the Department's vets will make those decisions. There is sometimes a feeling among the agricultural community that some of the Department's vets do not live in the real world.

The Chairperson: How would they get that idea? *[Laughter.]* Will there be a code of practice for seizures?

Mr McGuckian: We have already said that there will be. At the moment we do not seize, but we said earlier that there will be something like a code of practice to assist people with the process.

Mr W Clarke: Retaining the annual £760,000 budget will be essential if councils are to take on the powers. I understand that the Minister can only stand over her mandate and that it is difficult to look into the future, but councils need a fallback position. The councils need to know that if the funding is withdrawn, the Department will look at things again and take the powers back in-house, which is something that it does not do with non-farmed animals. The councils will not have the resources if the funding is withdrawn, and they could say that they cannot afford to do the job. What guarantees can the Department, rather than the Minister, give on that?

Ms McMaster: Concerns were raised on the security of the funding. We are aware of those concerns, but the Minister and the Department are committed to providing a baseline of £760,000 each year for the duration of the forthcoming Budget period. The Committee will be aware that the Minister has entered a bid in

the Budget 2010 process for £760,000 a year to assist councils with that work. The Minister has given a firm commitment that the £760,000 will be allocated through the Department's budget even if that bid is unsuccessful and that that funding will be entered as a baseline for the next Budget period to assist councils with enforcement of the Bill.

The Minister has asked us to highlight that, if there is any proposal to change funding in the future, the Committee would be advised of that and that it would be open to scrutiny by the Committee. The Department has no reason to believe that any future Minister would seek to change that position. The Welfare of Animals Bill has obtained cross-party support, and we do not anticipate that a Minister from a different party would change that provision in the future.

Ms Davey: Although the Bill will place a statutory responsibility on the Department and councils to enforce the Bill, the powers are permissive in that they will allow the councils and the Department to decide how best to implement them within the available resources. It is about looking at what resources will be available and what can be done. It is unlikely that every welfare case will be dealt with, and we will need to work with councils to see how they prioritise work, what cases should be dealt with and what cases can be left.

Some minor welfare complaints will not be investigated. It is about trying to address matters within available resources. The resources will be there, but, should there be a time when they are cut, and we do not think there will be, we would have to look at how we reprioritise.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a local councillor. My mum and dad also have a family farm business.

With regard to the Department's vets looking at purely agricultural animals, is it not possible to have a joined-up approach between local government and the Department? If there is a complaint, I suspect that a council's environmental health officers would carry out an initial investigation. However, in cases when veterinary opinion is needed, is it not possible to draw on departmental resources, instead of employing additional vets at council level?

Ms Davey: That is certainly not the Minister's proposal. The Minister wants to concentrate the Department's resources on the fight against animal diseases such as TB and brucellosis. She is resourcing councils so that they take

forward that work. At this point in time, it is certainly not the Minister's policy that they combine.

We also want a clear divide so that members of the public know who they can contact if they have a complaint. Once an organisation starts to take an investigation forward, it is probably best if that organisation continues right through, if necessary, to prosecution. That makes for a more easily prepared case, rather than people dipping in and out.

Mr Beggs: Are there models elsewhere that may work here? Given that there are 26 local councils, I can see it being a very bureaucratic process if each starts to employ vets on a part-time basis or whatever. There will be a need to develop expertise in that area and have consistency. Did you look at that?

Ms Davey: We will do that in working with councils to implement the Bill. There is no requirement for all 26 councils to start to employ individual officers. We will look at how that money is given to councils, and there will be the opportunity, if councils so wish, to have one or two centres of excellence to take forward all or parts of that enforcement element. We can work through those implementation issues with councils. However, we are certainly not saying that every council has to do every last element. It may be better if parts of it were to be provided by a central group, where expertise could be developed.

Mr Savage: Kate, you summed it up well when you said that when inspectors are on the farm and see something that should not be happening, such as cruelty to animals, they are powerless and have to walk away. You must have powers to do something, or there is no use you being there. Paddy said that a weakness in the 1972 Act needed to be overcome. Why can that not be done?

Ms Davey: The new Bill will give us the power to take action when an animal is likely to suffer. If this Bill is put on hold, and clause 45 is put on hold, we will not have the power to do anything.

Mr Savage: That problem needs to be addressed, and then everyone will be a winner.

Ms Davey: I agree entirely.

Mr Savage: There could be overlap between councils and the Department. However, if something happens that should not be happening, then that problem has to be addressed.

Ms Davey: I agree.

Mr Molloy: Five minutes ago, I was advised by the departmental officials that the advice that they give to farmers alleviates the problem of seizure. They do not have to seize, because once they tell a farmer to do something, it is always sorted out. We are now being told that they have no power to do anything. They have to turn their eyes and walk away.

We heard the emotional stuff from Kate about animals dying and all the rest of it. We are dealing with reality here, and here is the idea that you have to turn your back, walk away and do nothing. Ten minutes ago, you told us that when you advise farmers, they are normally regulated, and seizure is not necessary. This is legislation being slipped through by the back door.

Ms Davey: This is not legislation that has been slipped through. The Department sat at this table on numerous occasions and clearly spelled out what the legislation, additional powers, and changes are about.

Mr Molloy: No. Going back again to the issue of seizure, are you saying that the Department has not, over the past number of years, entered premises and farms, seized animals and restricted others and had no authority to do so?

Ms McMaster: We are talking about welfare in this instance. In the case of welfare, the Department has not had the power to seize. We explained earlier that, currently, the PSNI has power to seize, and it will do so on behalf of the Department in certain cases. However the Department itself has no such power. This Bill is specifically about the welfare of animals; it is not about other areas of work in which the Department is engaged. In this area of our work, animal welfare legislation is deficient —

Mr Molloy: Is it not a good thing that the Department has to consult with others? Sometimes when the Department makes decisions on its own, and it does not consult with anyone, it makes bad decisions.

I return to the issue about councils and the delay in implementation. The last sentence of Kate Davey's letter states that we will have a period of 12 months after Royal Assent before this provision is introduced by a commencement Order. It says:

"That will allow Councils time to get the necessary resources, systems and procedures in place and

be ready to implement the new powers before they come into force."

Therefore, it is not about consideration for the role of councils or consultation with them. Commencement is only deferred to allow the councils to get resources into place. Probably, at that stage, the Department's resources will have dried up. Councils will probably have to employ staff to run the systems that they put in place. We have also been told that the Department's officials and vets will not be available.

Councils need to be very clear that this is being passed on to them, lock, stock and barrel. The message is: "do not ask us about this afterwards. Do not ask our vets or interrupt them, they have too many other things to do." Councils will be taking on this role completely. They need to be very clear about that. The deferment of 12 months is not to allow for proper consultation or to do anything other than give councils time to put the provisions into operation.

The Chairperson: Mr Molloy paints a very black-and-white picture. Is it the case that the Department will wash its hands of this after 12 months and leave councils totally on their own?

Ms McMaster: The Minister has said that she is committed to DARD officials giving practical assistance to councils. That is not something that we foresee ending after 12 months. That will be ongoing, and we will have engagement with councils thereafter. This will continue to be a welfare of animals issue. We will monitor and continue to take feedback from councils as to how that role is delivered by them. It is something in which we will have an ongoing interest.

Mr Molloy: When Mr Beggs asked whether veterinary assistance would be made available, the Department just said no, it was not what the Minister envisaged.

Ms Davey: We do not anticipate that the Department's vets will go out and assess non-farmed animals. That is not the Minister's policy. Rather, it will be taken forward. The legislation will still be owned by the Department, and councils can seek advice from it. There is no point in trying to mislead you. This is why the funding is being given to the councils. It is to allow them to seek the veterinary expertise in cases where they need it on the ground and to build up that expertise for prosecutions etc. However, the Department still owns the

policy and the legislation, so of course it will be available for advice and guidance.

Mr Molloy: On the evidence that this Committee has heard, £760,000 would only pay half a dozen court bills. It would not cover the employment of inspectors or the implementation of this policy. If this is the Department's Bill and the Department has ownership of it, the Department should implement it, instead of putting down legislation and then passing it over to local government without the resources to enforce it. There is no guarantee of resources after this year. The Department should take on the responsibility for it.

Ms Davey: The Minister has given a guarantee that she will create a budget line for the next CSR period. The next Budget period is four years. She is putting that —

Mr Molloy: The Budget has not been agreed yet.

Ms Davey: I appreciate that. However, the Minister has clearly said — she said it at this Committee — that, irrespective of whether or not her bid for £760,000 is met, she will find £760,000 and put it in a budget line for that work for the next Budget period.

The Chairperson: Mr Molloy asked about the consultation between local councils and the Department. Would it help if the Committee were to meet every three months with local council representatives, as we did the other week, and with the Department to see whether there has been adequate consultation and whether the local councillors are content?

Mr Molloy: I want that consultation to happen before we pass the Bill. Once we pass the Bill, the Department will snub its nose at it and will tell the councils that it is up to them and that they should get on with it. That is exactly what will happen. Once we pass it, the Department will be out of the door as quickly as possible, and the councils will pay for it. That is clearly the Department's role. We want consultation prior to the Bill being approved and prior to Royal Assent.

Ms McMaster: Firm guarantees have been given about the engagement that the Department will undertake with councils. The Minister has reaffirmed those guarantees. Therefore, it is not a case of washing our hands of the issue once the Bill is passed. That is not what has been said.

Mr Molloy: We were told that the consultation had already happened over the past four years, that the councils were all happy with that and

that they wanted to get stuck into this as quickly as possible. However, when the councils came to the Committee, they said that there had been no consultation. Therefore, making promises and keeping them are two different things.

Mr Savage: Am I right in thinking that the councils will do the work on behalf of the Department, given that the Department owns the legislation?

Ms McMaster: Councils will have powers to act under the legislation. Therefore, the legislation itself will give councils the powers to act. They will not act under the direction of the Department.

Ms Davey: They will work under guidance from the Department. We will issue guidance on the appointment and role of inspectors, and that is outlined in clause 45. Councils will have to work under the guidance on how to implement the legislation.

Mr Savage: I am clear in my mind now.

Mr Molloy: When does a farmed animal stop being a farmed animal? Is it only a farmed animal when it is living, or is it a farmed animal when it is dead? In cases of fallen animals, the Department has not given councils any resources to deal with that problem. The Department for Regional Development's Roads Service does not take any responsibility for an animal on the road, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is supposed to look after the welfare of farmed animals. The welfare of animals can take in a whole lot of different aspects, including the dead animal and the animals around it. However, the Department has never come to terms with that legislation at all.

Ms McMaster: There is a definition of farmed animals, and Kate will clarify that for members. This legislation does not relate to fallen animals; it relates to the welfare of animals.

Mr Molloy: What is the legislation on fallen animals? Who deals with fallen animals?

Ms Davey: That comes under the Department's legislation on animal by-products.

Mr Molloy: Can you give us some clarification?

Ms Davey: The definition of a "farmed animal" is included in the proposed amendment to clause 45(2). It is: "any animal bred or kept for the production of food, wool or skin or for other farming purposes."

Mr Molloy asked about welfare cases. Welfare is about an animal when it is alive. However, the

evidence could suggest that dead animals on the ground have been welfare cases when they were alive. Therefore, it is not a case of looking at live animals only; we will look at the evidence when we go out to assess a welfare case.

Mr Molloy: That is the point that I am making. The Department is taking no responsibility for animals that lie fallen on roads, in rivers or fields. There have been cases in the past of children walking past dead animals on their way to school, yet the Department and everyone else refuses to take responsibility.

Ms Davey: Again, we are talking about welfare cases —

Mr Molloy: I am talking about welfare.

Ms Davey: The animals that you are speaking about are unlikely to have died as a result of a welfare case. It is more likely that they have died as the result of an accident or an illness.

Mr Molloy: It does not matter how it happened. The Department is taking on the welfare of animals. When animals die, will the Department wash its hands of any responsibility?

Ms Davey: That is not a welfare issue. It depends on the reason why animals die: if they die through neglect and suffering it is a welfare issue; if they die through disease or natural causes it is not.

Mr Molloy: To cut to the chase, are you saying that when an animal dies it is not the Department's responsibility?

Ms Davey: I said what I said; it depends on the reason why animals die. We are only here to look the Welfare of Animals Bill.

Mr Molloy: The Department does not go out and ask —

Mr McGuckian: Can I come in?

Mr Molloy: If animals lie dead at the side of roads, the Department does not go out and inspect them to see why they died. It simply says that it is not its responsibility.

Ms McMaster: The Bill is about improving the welfare of animals and preventing their unnecessary suffering.

The Chairperson: I think that we are getting away from the point.

Mr Molloy: We are not getting away from the point.

The Chairperson: With respect, we are.

Mr Molloy: We are asking about where resources come from, and, in the past, the Department has washed its hands of this issue. It will be judged on its history.

The Chairperson: Mr Molloy has serious concerns with clause 17, and he has relayed those concerns this morning. If the Department were to be seen by the Committee as having fallen down in delivering in that area, could the Committee take forward primary legislation to amend the Bill?

Ms Davey: There would be nothing to prevent the Committee from taking that forward.

The Chairperson: OK. The Committee has discussed this issue at length, and it needs to move on.

Question put, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content with clause 17, subject, firstly, to the amendment recommended at clause 45 by the Committee and agreed by the Department and, secondly, confirmation by the Minister that paragraph 45(1)(b) will not be commenced for a period not less than 12 months.

Mr Molloy: I do not agree. I propose that the Committee defers its decision until it gets clarification from the Department on both issues. The present legislation continues and does not lapse.

The Chairperson: We have a proposal from Mr Molloy that the Committee defers. Are Committee members content?

Members indicated dissent.

The Chairperson: We will take a vote on Mr Molloy's proposal.

Mr Molloy: I beg to move

That the Committee defers its decision until it gets clarification from the Department on both issues.

Question put.

The Committee divided: Ayes 1; Noes 5.

AYES

Mr Molloy

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr Gibson, Mr Irwin, Mr Moutray, Mr Savage

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content with clause 17, subject, firstly, to the amendment recommended at clause 45 by the Committee and agreed by the Department and, secondly, confirmation by the Minister that paragraph 45(1)(b) will not be commenced for a period not less than 12 months, put and agreed to.

Clause 17 agreed to.

Mr Molloy: I record my disagreement with that decision. I must leave the meeting to take the Chair in the House.

The Chairperson: OK. That has been noted.

Clauses 18 to 28 agreed to.

Clause 29 (Power of councils to prosecute offences)

The Chairperson: The background to clause 29 was discussed previously at length during our deliberations on clause 17.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject, first, to the amendment at clause 45 recommended by the Committee and agreed by the Department, and, second, confirmation by the Minister that clause 45(1)(b) will not be commenced for a period of not less than 12 months, put and agreed to.

Clause 29 agreed to.

Clause 30 agreed to.

The Chairperson: The amendment to clause 6 will result in consequential amendments to clauses 31 to 33.

Clauses 31 to 33 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 34 and 35 agreed to.

Clause 36 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 37 to 40 agreed to.

Clause 41 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 42 to 44 agreed to.

Clause 45 (Inspectors)

The Chairperson: The background to the clause was previously discussed during our deliberations on clause 17.

Question, That the Committee is content with the amendment recommended by the Committee and agreed by the Department, subject to confirmation by the Minister that clause 45(1)(b) will not be commenced for a period of not less than 12 months, put and agreed to.

Clause 45 agreed to.

Clauses 46 to 54 agreed to.

Clause 55 (Regulations)

The Chairperson: The Department has agreed to amend clause 1 to make clause 1(3), by means of clause 55, subject to the affirmative resolution process in line with similar legislation in England and Scotland. This will be considered, therefore, at clause 55(2). In addition, the amended clause 6 will have a consequential amendment.

Clause 55 referred for further consideration.

The Chairperson: As no issues were raised in relation to clause 56 to 60, I propose to group them.

Mr Savage: I have a question about clause 56. The definition of “farmed animal” has been discussed from time to time. Are dogs and horses farm animals or are they not? I am talking about a dog on a farm.

When inspectors come in to do a farm quality assurance inspection or anything like that, one of the questions that they ask is whether the dog is wormed, and they ask for proof from the vet. That is a big question. If you have no proof that the dog was wormed, you are in trouble. That is something that has to be sorted out. It affects everybody, because Department inspectors visit all farms and ask whether the dog has been wormed.

Ms Davey: I will clarify that. The proposed amendment to Clause 45(2) of the Bill clarifies the definition of a “farmed animal”. I will read it again and then explain a little element of it: “‘farmed animal’ means any animal bred or kept for the production of food, wool or skin or for other farming purposes.”

If you are talking about a sheepdog, that would be included in the category of farmed animals, in that it is kept for other farming purposes purely as a sheepdog. However, if you are talking about the pet poodle in the house, it would not —

Mr Savage: There are Alsations on our farm. The first question that was asked was: is the dog wormed?

Ms Davey: Are they used for farming purposes?

Mr Savage: Yes; they are on the farm, and have more access to it than any person on the farm.

Ms Davey: If the dog is used for farming purposes, it would be included under the category of “farmed animal”. If the animal is not used for farming purposes, it would not.

Mr Savage: It is a grey area. I am just bringing it to the Committee’s attention, because I know that question is asked quite frequently.

Clauses 56 to 60 agreed to.

Schedule 1 (Procedures to which section 5 does not apply)

The Chairperson: I spoke earlier on clause 5 of the Bill in respect of the prohibited procedures and making subordinate legislation to outline permitted procedures, which would, in effect, do away with the need for schedule 1. It would be removed. It might be helpful to explain that the first two paragraphs of schedule 1 would be taken into the body of the Bill, and paragraphs 3 to 6 would be covered as permitted procedures in subordinate legislation. The Department has previously tabled a new schedule 1.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 1, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment as agreed by the Department, put and agreed to.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedules 2 to 5 agreed to.

The Committee Clerk: We do not agree the long title until the other clauses that the Committee has agreed to defer have been dealt with.

The Chairperson: That concludes the meeting for this morning. I thank the officials for attending once again.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Environment

7 December 2010

High Hedges Bill (NIA 15/09)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Cathal Boylan (Chairperson)
Mr Patsy McGlone (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr John Dallat
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Ms Helen Anderson	
Mr Paul Byrne	Department of the Environment
Ms Jennifer Stewart	

The Chairperson (Mr Boylan): Members have been provided with a clause-by-clause analysis table, a copy of the Bill, a departmental response to the Committee's queries on clauses 2 and 3 with a covering letter, and further information on options for amending clause 3. Draft Committee amendments have also been provided. Departmental officials are available to answer any further queries that members have. I invite the officials to come forward. They are Helen Anderson, Paul Byrne and Jennifer Stewart, who are all from the environmental policy division. We will now go through each of the clauses and the long title one by one to seek the Committee's position on each. I remind members that this will be their last opportunity to discuss the clauses of the Bill, and that their decisions will be final.

Clause 1 (Complaints to which this Act applies)

The Chairperson: I remind members that, in response to concerns raised by stakeholders about definitions, the Department indicated that it was developing guidance with NILGA that

would be available on commencement of the Bill. Officials advised the Committee that that guidance will address technical issues such as measuring light impact, and members were subsequently content with the clause.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (High hedge)

The Chairperson: I remind members that at its meeting of 18 November, the Committee asked the Department to reconsider the inclusion of single evergreen or semi-evergreen trees. The Department's reply stated that:

"The inclusion of single tree problems would fundamentally change the scope of the Bill and would require the Department to undertake a full public consultation before making an amendment to this effect."

After being provided with that information at last week's meeting, Committee members asked for a draft Committee amendment, which would include single evergreen or semi-evergreen trees, to be drawn up for discussion. That amendment is provided in members' packs. I invite the witnesses to summarise the single-trees issue.

Ms Helen Anderson (Department of the Environment)

(Department of the Environment): We were happy to take away the Committee's concerns on single trees and to look at the provision again. We responded to those concerns in the correspondence dated 3 December 2010. Single trees are fundamentally different to hedges, which are deemed as being continuous barriers. Previous consultations undertaken by the Planning Service and by the environmental policy division of the Department only considered hedges, and there was no consultation on single trees. On the basis of what was consulted on and the way in which the Bill has been drafted, the Department sought its own legal advice, which indicated that the inclusion of single trees would be outwith the scope of the current Bill as drafted. That advice also suggested that any attempt to extend the Bill to cover single trees would require extensive consultation and a major redrafting of the Bill. However, we are also conscious that the scope of any Bill is ultimately determined by the Speaker.

The Chairperson: OK. Would the Clerk of Bills like to add anything before I ask members for their views?

The Clerk of Bills: The proposed amendment has been provided to members. However, as Helen said, there is an issue with scope, which the Speaker must consider. The amendment is sufficient for debate, but I cannot advise the Committee on what the Speaker's ruling will be, and whether the amendment will be considered to be within the scope of the Bill.

I also point out that it is possible that, should the amendment be made during the Bill's Consideration Stage, a further raft of amendments could be required to address the divergence between hedges and single trees. For the purpose of the Bill, the amendment will treat trees as hedges, and it indicates the Committee's wish for that to be the case. However, the detail of that may require further consideration and a raft of further amendments to be made during the Bill's Further Consideration Stage.

Mr T Clarke: I am happy to stick with the amendment. The consultation showed that 8% of those who replied to it had concerns about single trees, and, although it is good that we are addressing 92% of concerns, we should not dismiss that other 8%. The people who will be affected are those who live in built-up residential areas.

The Chairperson: OK. Mr Clarke feels strongly about proposing the amendment to clause 2. Do any other members have issues or points that they want to raise about the amendment?

Mr W Clarke: It would be very hard to enforce. I agree that there are issues in regard to single trees. However, in my opinion, this is opening a minefield. A tree that might be someone's pride and joy may be cut down. It may open up a lot of work for councils.

Mr T Clarke: We are opening up the same amount of work in relation to hedges. Someone may have tended to and looked after a hedge with more than one evergreen, should it be two, three, four or more. More work went into that. We will still have to tell the owner to cut it down if it is causing a nuisance. The Bill would not allow for the council to come and cut down a tree unless it is causing a nuisance. If the tree is not causing a nuisance, it will not be cut down.

Ms H Anderson: The word "nuisance" is common parlance in public health law that councils deal with. However, this legislation does not allow for a "nuisance" situation. This is just a minor

point. I understand the point that has been made. However, this Bill is to do with two individuals and their personal enjoyment of their own property.

Our understanding is that any council ruling to require a single tree to be reduced in height could be viewed as a greater interference in someone's personal property, if there is only one tree involved. I understand what is being said. A lot of care and attention goes into growing a hedge. However, the Bill contains a new concept. It is not about wrong and right, statutory nuisance, public health protection or environmental protection. This is about a balance between the personal enjoyment of a person who owns a hedge and wants to have it for his own privacy, and someone whose garden or property is overshadowed by a hedge. That hedge may be depriving him of light and interfering, in his view, with his enjoyment of that property. Councils must address a fine balance in the outworkings of this legislation. In the legal advice that we have obtained, a single tree is viewed as more of an amenity issue than a hedge that incorporates a number of trees or bushes.

Mr McGlone: Helen has drawn us into territory on which I was seeking some clarification. The high hedges issue is about one person's enjoyment versus another's. I was going to use the word "amenity". Trees can lead to blocking out light, or poor television, mobile phone or satellite signals. One person's enjoyment of a lovely looking tree can be a big intrusion on another's lifestyle or enjoyment. The issue has really grown from a hedge to a tree.

Ms H Anderson: I understand the Committee's point. A yew tree can be very high and wide. We are not unsympathetic to the points that the Committee makes. However, we have obtained advice on these issues and there are fundamental differences between the concept of a single tree and that of a hedge. However, this is a decision for the Committee. All that I can do is share the information we have obtained.

Mr T Clarke: I ask Helen whether a single leylandii is a hedge or a tree?

Ms H Anderson: A single leylandii is defined as a tree under this Bill.

Mr T Clarke: What about two leylandii? They are still trees.

Mr W Clarke: They are, but the legislation relates to high hedges. A high hedge is two or

more evergreens or semi-evergreens. The Bill contains a definition of a hedge. That is way the Bill is set up, and how it has been developed and brought forward. The Committee does not say that a single tree can be construed as a hedge, but that we might wish to consider the option of having a single tree included in this legislation, accepting that it is a different —

Mr T Clarke: That is where I think differently. If somebody with a small backyard in a residential area plants a leylandii, especially in social housing, it will have the same effect as a hedge. Call it what you want, but it will be the same as a hedge to the neighbours, because it will block out light and grow wide and tall. It has the same effect as a hedge.

Ms H Anderson: The definition of a hedge would have to be changed in the Bill, because, as drafted, a hedge is defined with the term “two or more”.

The Chairperson: We are definitely getting into a minefield of issues around the issue of single trees. Where does that stop? I am not in favour of going down the route of a single-tree definition. We brought that up at the very start of the discussions, when I was talking about other trees, such as yew trees, not specifically evergreens.

If we have to go to a vote on this issue, we have to go to a vote. First, are members content with the amendment?

Mr Kinahan: Chairman, could I have a quick brief on what was said around this point previously?

The Chairperson: The issue is whether we accept a single-tree definition in the Bill. We have brought forward a draft amendment — you have been provided with a copy — that extends the Bill to include single evergreen trees. That is where we are. We have to decide whether to agree the amendment put forward by the Committee to include single evergreens. We had an explanation from the Department that that may change the scope of the Bill and that we may have to put it out to consultation again.

Mr McGlone: I want to seek a wee bit of expansion as to why we have to mention the word “evergreen”.

The Chairperson: That was Mr Clarke’s suggestion at the time.

Mr McGlone: I am thinking of a situation in which it could be something else causing the problem.

The Chairperson: Before we get into this, we brought up the issue of single trees at the very start and looked at the social housing issue. As well as changing the scope of the Bill, it would be a minefield to include single trees.

The Clerk of Bills: To clarify Mr McGlone’s point about evergreen and semi-evergreen trees, the Bill as drafted deals with evergreen or semi-evergreen hedges. If we extend that to include trees, for the purposes of this amendment I assumed that the Committee was looking at evergreen or semi-evergreen trees, given that those constitute more of a problem. However, that would be for the Committee to adjust as required.

The Committee Clerk: To add to that, when we discussed this matter at a previous meeting, there was some concern about the impact on single deciduous trees and the fact that those can be subject to protection orders. Therefore, there was an incentive to narrow it down.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, I have to put the amendment to the Committee. I certainly am not in favour of it, but it will have to go to a vote.

Mr Kinahan: Chairman, in time, we should try to find some way of dealing with leylandii. I completely take your point that we cannot deal with single trees, given all the history and stories that go with trees. However, if we could somehow get leylandii defined —

Mr T Clarke: During the consultation, 8% of people felt that single trees should be included. Given that it has taken a long time for even this piece of legislation to be brought to the House, when is that going to be revisited? Probably not for years and years. It has taken many years for this Bill to come forward. For that reason, I would prefer to see single trees going included, which would satisfy that 8% of the population.

Mr Ross: If the amendment goes to the Floor of the House and is debated, the Department could, at that stage, state that it would make the Bill untenable, and the amendment would not be moved. Even if, ultimately, the amendment were not moved, at least all the issues that the Committee is now aware of could be raised and at least the Department would be aware that issues still need to be addressed.

The Chairperson: Yes; that is possible. However, I could also argue the point that we might be safer not bringing it to the Floor of the House.

Mr T Clarke: I hate to argue the point, but the Department is opposed to —

The Chairperson: No. I am willing to put it to the vote. I do not agree with it, but I will put it to the Committee and we will take a vote on it. Are members content with the amendment to clause 2?

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 3.

AYES

Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr McGlone, Mr Ross

NOES

Mr Boylan, Mr W Clarke, Mr Kinahan

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 2, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 3 (Procedure for dealing with complaints)

The Chairperson: I remind members that, at its meeting on 18 November, the Committee asked the Department to explore the potential for an amendment to require councils to refund fees for upheld complaints and recoup the cost from the hedge owner.

The first reply from the Department stated that the Bill, as currently drafted, allows a council to refund the fee to a complainant if it wishes to do so. On receiving this information last week, the Committee remained concerned that such a refund, if adopted, would be at the cost of the ratepayer and asked if a Committee amendment could be drafted for discussion.

In a second reply, the Department put forward four possible options in relation to the issue. The first is for the transfer of fee and charge to the hedge owner; the second, for an administrative charge to the hedge owner for the creation and issue of a remedial notice; three, for there to be no fee for making a complaint; and four, for retaining the existing legislative provision, namely the Bill as drafted. The Department gave the pros and cons for each option, concluding that the status quo, option 4, offers the lowest risk, as the others add new levels of complexity. The other options have not been consulted

on and differ from provision elsewhere in the UK. I advise members that a draft Committee amendment is provided.

I invite the Department to summarise.

Ms H Anderson: Summarising this paper will be a bit more difficult. We understood clearly the Committee's concerns. Let me reassure you that the Department is keen to ensure that complainants do not feel unduly or unjustly penalised. We need to bring forward a mechanism that is transparent and which meets the needs of parties for a satisfactory solution of the issue on the ground.

We looked at the first option. We were conscious that the Committee had asked us to look at the issue of transferring fees, but we felt that there was merit in exploring some of the other options so that the Committee would have a complete picture to make the decision. We looked in great detail at the transfer of fees. One thing that I must impress upon the Committee is that any change to the legislation in respect of transferring the fee or trying to apportion the fee across the complainant and the hedge owner is quite complex. There are knock-on effects.

I will talk you through a bit of that. It was included in the options appraisal. However, we condensed a lot of information into a few sides of paper for that. A mechanism would need to be in place to bring about the transfer of fee. If there were a simple transfer of the fee chargeable to the complainant to the hedge owner, there could be difficulties. The legislation as currently drafted allows the council discretion as to whether and how much to charge. The council would conduct an assessment, dependent on the complainant's circumstances, to determine how much it wanted to charge. However, if that fee is simply transferred over to a hedge owner who was obliged to reduce the height of his hedge, there could be a situation whereby a wealthy complainant makes a complaint, the council assesses his circumstances and decides to charge the maximum fee, and that is transferred to a financially poor hedge owner, who would then face, not only the cost of cutting down the hedge, but that of meeting the fee determined on the financial circumstances of the complainant. That is an issue. That can be got round by bringing forward a provision to allow for discretion in the alteration of fees, in view of the personal circumstances of complainant or hedge owner.

Mr T Clarke: Chairman, I thought that before any debate was entered into with the council that contact had to be made by the neighbour of the hedge owner to bring their concerns to the attention of the owner. If they neglect to do so, surely they should be responsible for all fines and there should be no mechanism for them to get out of paying any money, regardless of their circumstances. At the end of the day, if contact was made in the first place, it was brought to the owner's attention that their tree was causing a nuisance, and if the person does not appropriately address that, they should be made to pay whatever fees are in order.

Ms H Anderson: I apologise for the repeating myself, but, as the legislation sits, there are no innocent or guilty parties; the legislation seeks to resolve disputes between neighbours.

You raised the valid point that councils need to assure themselves that informal means have been used to try to resolve issues. If on the basis of what the complaint tells it, the council is assured that there has been appropriate informal contact, the complainant can elect to pay a fee and their financial circumstances would be taken into account in determining that fee. The council would then provide them with a service and consider whether the personal enjoyment of their property is being adversely affected by the tree. On the other hand, a hedge owner may not feel that they have been appropriately and adequately contacted by the complainant. In that case, the situation in law is that they did not elect to avail themselves of the service the council had offered, and, if it is found that their hedge needs to be cut down, they would have to pay for that action to be taken, and a fee. They would have to keep the hedge at an agreed height over subsequent years.

If the fee were based on the circumstances of the complainant, legal action could be taken against the Bill on human rights and fairness grounds. Had we consulted on that type of situation, we would be on a stronger footing, but it was never consulted on. Transferring a fee from someone who perceives that they have a sufferance, and, in trying to alleviate that, elects to buy in a service when someone else who has not elected to buy in that service is required to pay at a rate determined by their neighbour's financial circumstances presents issues that could leave the Bill open to legal action.

As it stands, the Bill takes the circumstances of the complainant into account when determining how much to charge them. If that were transferred over, it would mean applying someone else's circumstances when determining how much to charge the hedge owner. If the decision is that that fee should transfer over, our understanding is that, in legal terms, it would no longer be a fee. Instead, it would be a penalty, which would be applied to the hedge owner and could result in a greater likelihood of further action being taken. A decision must be made on whether the fee is transferred, and, if it is, there would also be an opportunity to bring in discretionary powers for councils so that they could determine the circumstances of the hedge owner and what would be a reasonable fee for them. There are options.

The Chairperson: You could not bring in something simple, so that someone could be charged for cutting down a hedge. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ross: I have a similar point to Trevor. The hedge owner would have the opportunity to take the necessary action before being charged a fee. That highlights the difficulty in proving that there has been contact beforehand, which has always been a concern to me. Indeed, even if someone had contacted their neighbour verbally or by letter, the neighbour could just throw that letter away and claim that there had been no communication.

That is a bigger issue, and I agree with Trevor that, if an individual is approached and refuses to take the necessary action, they have themselves to blame for any fee that comes their way.

Mr Paul Byrne (Department of the Environment): There is an additional point. If a person takes that action on instruction from the council, they are complying with its decision, but their neighbour's means is still used to determine what is effectively a penalty on the person who then has complied. That is a disproportionate response, and it could be regarded as an unfair response.

Mr Ross: Can you say that again? I am not quite sure that I understood that.

Mr Byrne: If the complainant were to ask the council for remedy, the council would put forward that remedy and impose it on the hedge owner. If the hedge owner were to comply —

Mr Ross: There is a stage before that, when the complainant would have to go directly to the hedge owner. The hedge owner would be looking at the same criteria as the complainant, so they would be aware of whether the council would be able to take action against them.

Mr Byrne: Yes, but that places the penalty on the hedge owner, using the neighbour's means to determine what that penalty should be. In other words, the hedge owner's circumstances are not taken into consideration when the penalty is applied. That is disproportionate and unfair, and could lead to human rights problems.

Mr T Clarke: It also highlights the fact that there should not have been a means-tested fee. A standard fee should have been applied regardless of one's circumstances.

Mr Byrne: If that were done, the discretion of councils would be taken away, and there would be a set fee.

Mr T Clarke: It sounds as though a set fee might work easier. How does a council judge how much someone can afford to pay?

Mr Byrne: That is part of the problem. The council would have to do that.

Mr T Clarke: If I were to complain about Tom's tree next door to me, how would the council decide on how much I should pay in relation to making that complaint?

Ms H Anderson: The councils will determine that. They will set that out. Some of the English councils have already done so. There are particular benefit payments that will be taken into account in determining whether a person will be eligible for a reduction in the costs. The councils will set out people who are on income support and who are in receipt of various types of benefits.

The Chairperson: Paul, that is fine, and it is OK to give people the opportunity to talk, discuss and come to some sort of arrangement. However the legislation has been introduced because, in some cases, a resolution cannot be achieved. Some payment and some action needs to be taken. We do not want the Bill to result in the claimant having to pay without being reimbursed. Mr Weir, who is not here, said that, and I agree with him. If the hedge owner is found to be at fault, it should not be ratepayers who pay for it, but the person who is responsible. They should be given a period of

time to address the issue, and the Bill provides for that. You give option 4 as going with what is in the Bill, and the complainant's fee could be set or capped. We will have to reach some resolution today.

Mr W Clarke: You touched on what I was going to say. The complainant has to have their money returned. I agree that there has to be a sliding scale based on people's ability to pay. The consultation end of it is fine. You can do that and take into account people's circumstances.

[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]

That certainly has to be taken into account. Anything else could not be defended, because we could not force people to choose between feeding themselves, keeping warm or cutting down a hedge — *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]*

Ms H Anderson: It is likely that cutting down the hedge will cost considerably more money than the payment of a fee. If the hedge owner ends up paying a fee that is determined on the basis of the circumstances of the complainant, that will simply put much more onus on district councils to ensure that any informal contact was adequate or comprehensive. They may need to take into account not only the complainant's view but the hedge owner's view on that so that they do not get caught in a situation of a vexatious complainant just as easily as getting caught in a situation of a vexatious hedge owner.

The Chairperson: *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]* It is discretionary at the minute. We go out and try to mediate. It will, basically, give the council the power to say that, if a neighbour complains, they have to do something about it and pay for the complaint. We are saying that there is no way — *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]*

Ms H Anderson: We understand that.

The Chairperson: We need to look at that. It does not matter whether it is happening in England and Wales. The person who makes the complaint — *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]*

Mr McGlone: *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]* I do not know how convoluted that argument is at the moment. If a fence or, in this case, a high hedge has been proven to be

intrusive or to impact on the — *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]*

Mr Byrne: We need to be very careful. This is not a judicial procedure.

Mr McGlone: I did not say that it is.

Mr Byrne: It is an administrative matter. The hedge owner has not done anything wrong by growing the hedge or by not trimming it. We are saying that, if a problem is identified, the Bill will give the complainant an opportunity for remedy.

The Chairperson: I will put it a different way. It gives the council that power. It is all right saying that the Bill gives the complainant that opportunity, but it gives the council a way to address the issue. We are not complicating the matter; it is quite simple. We are asking that a person who grows a 20 ft hedge is asked to cut it down to 6 ft 6 in or to 2 metres, and to pay for it. If we go down the route of the complainant and we look at capping a fee, that is fine. The Committee is asking for the complainant to be reimbursed.

Mr Byrne: For the complainant to be reimbursed?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Byrne: That is already in the Bill. It is transferring the fee.

The Chairperson: The reimbursement is at the discretion of the council, is it not?

Ms H Anderson: That is right.

The Chairperson: That is ratepayers' money.

Mr T Clarke: What happens if a person does not cut the tree down?

The Chairperson: Let us be honest; it is ratepayers' money.

Ms H Anderson: As the Bill stands, if the council chooses to reimburse the complainant, ratepayers would pick up the tab. That is right.

The Chairperson: That is not what we —

Ms H Anderson: Is that not what the Committee wants?

The Chairperson: No. We want that sorted out, because there is no point in anyone paying rates for somebody in the far end of their council district to get a hedge cut down. The person who is found liable should pay. We are using

a mechanism to make the complaint, which is fine, but reimbursement must not be by the ratepayer. That is what we are saying.

Ms H Anderson: I understand that.

Mr McGlone: This may be an area that puts me in thick form, but I am wee bit confused. The person who has grown the hedge to a certain height has done nothing wrong, yet the argument could be sustained that that person is creating a problem.

Ms H Anderson: Yes; if their hedge is more than 2 metres high and continuously interferes with another person's enjoyment of their property.

Mr McGlone: Correct, so we need to be a bit clearer on that. It is not that they have done anything wrong, but at what point does their creation of a problem for a neighbour become something wrong in the perception of that neighbour? That is why the complaint is made.

Ms H Anderson: It is just the way in which the Bill is drafted at the moment, and it was drafted that way on the basis of the completed consultation. At present, the Bill deals with an administrative fee for the delivery of a service, a bit like paying for a planning application before the council will come out and look at it. We understand entirely that the Committee's view is that that payment should transfer to the person who grew the hedge. I understand that the current discussion is around whether that should transfer at the rate determined by the complainant's ability to pay or be decided on the basis of the amount that a council judged a hedge owner was personally able to pay.

Mr McGlone: You are really getting into means-testing everybody all round the place.

Ms Jennifer Stewart (Department of the Environment): If we have a poor, financially disadvantaged complainant who pays maybe half the standard fee, is that the amount that we transfer to the wealthy hedge owner?

Mr McGlone: We are entering into class politics over hedges, here. *[Laughter.]*

Mr T Clarke: We have established that this is an administrative matter and that someone can grow a tree to whatever height they want, so long as nobody complains. Given that, what happens if somebody then decides that that your tree is too high and you do not want to cut it down? It sounds like we have councils acting

as arbiters by coming and suggesting cutting a tree down to 2 metres. What happens if you do not want to cut it down?

Ms H Anderson: The council acts in default. There is a difference between the service —

Mr T Clarke: So, it is unlawful then.

Mr Byrne: It becomes unlawful not to comply with the council's required action. In other words, that can be enforced through the courts.

Mr T Clarke: So is it a legal requirement to have it 2 metres or lower if the council says that should be cut to that height?

Mr Byrne: Only if the council states so.

Mr T Clarke: That is what I said: if the council says that it must be cut to 2 metres.

Mr Byrne: Yes, and there is a set appeals mechanism by which the hedge owner can have that order examined.

Ms H Anderson: This is complex and unusual legislation. We understand the points that the Committee is trying to make. In our view, it is a matter of achieving balance. A major concern for us is also the fact that the transferring of fees and the associated additional burden on district councils were not consulted on.

The Chairperson: It would not be the first time that issues were not consulted on, Helen, so do not worry too much about that.

Ms H Anderson: I need to point out the facts.

The Chairperson: Well, look, Mr Weir is not here, but I agree with the amendment. The hedge owner should pay if found guilty. I will put that to members.

Mr W Clarke: Chairperson, we are back to the question of the ability to pay. If you say that —

The Chairperson: No, we are also looking at putting a cap on it.

Mr W Clarke: If someone has no money, what is the cap?

The Chairperson: But we are talking about the complainant.

Mr W Clarke: I understand, but may I get some clarification before you move on, Chairperson?

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr W Clarke: There is, again, a question over the complainant's ability to pay. We could have somebody with very little disposable income whose whole life, their human rights, are being ruined by a 30 ft or 40 ft hedge, and they are unable to take action, get the council involved or instigate mediation because they have not got the fee in the first place. So that fee must be means-tested.

Ms H Anderson: That is how it is set up in the legislation at the minute: it is means-tested for the complainant.

The Chairperson: Thanks very much for that clarification.

Mr W Clarke: Dead on. That deals with that first part.

The Chairperson: Far be it for me to argue with my colleague.

Mr W Clarke: I am trying to get clarity, because we are all round the place here.

Mr McGlone: We cannot see the woods for the hedge.

Mr W Clarke: The mediation process will take place, and that will be followed by a recommendation by the council on what action should be taken. It will recommend whether the hedge should be taken down, for instance. At that stage, it could be part of the leverage. The hedge owner would be informed that if they do not take immediate action, they will take on the fee of the complainant.

Ms H Anderson: The fee would have already been paid by the complainant. If it were deemed that the hedge owner needed to take down the hedge, the hedge owner would have to pay.

Mr Byrne: The complainant would pay the fee for the service. Effectively, it is means-tested. There is a discretionary element to the fee that they would have to pay. That is for a service. It is proposed that if the hedge owner has found that they are required to carry out the work, the fee that the complainant paid would be refunded, and the cost would be transferred to the hedge owner.

Mr T Clarke: Hopefully, this amendment will be included in the Bill. Clear guidance would be useful when the Bill gets rolled out. For instance, the person with the problem hedge should be aware when approached that they

could be in default and might have to pay the money back. Therefore, it is not as if there would be any misunderstanding. Everyone should take action when the informal process starts. If people were responsible, we would never get into a formal process. The council should give guidance to the person who wants to make the complaint, and that person must ensure that they follow the guidance and the proper steps before councils get involved. If everybody steps up and does their bit, we should never be at the formal stage. Those who want to continue to fight and twist deserve to get whatever fines come down the road for them.

Mr W Clarke: I agree with Trevor in that regard. In cases that I have been dealing with, the person making the complaint is willing to cut the trees down and take them away. That would not be an issue.

Mr Byrne: May I pose a question?

The Chairperson: Very quickly, because the members will be out cutting down trees soon.

Mr Byrne: Who determines whether the hedge owner has been co-operative?

Mr T Clarke: That is what I was getting at. Clear guidance should be provided by the councils to the complainant on what steps they should follow before they engage the council. One of those steps will, obviously, be a recorded delivery letter. If they can clearly demonstrate to the council that they followed the clear guidelines before the council takes it on, that is fair enough.

Mr Byrne: The onus on ensuring that non-co-operation took place becomes paramount in moving forward with this, because, otherwise, you could be seen to be treating one party unfairly.

The Chairperson: We are getting into mud. We are going round in circles again, but we understand.

Are members content with the Committee amendment to require councils to refund a fee to the complainant where a remedial notice is issued and to charge that fee to the hedge owner?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I remind members that a second issue on this clause was the introduction of an upper limit or a cap —

Mr W Clarke: I am not content, because it comes back to the hedge owner's ability to pay. You are

saying that they have to pay it, no matter what. Am I right in that regard?

Mr Byrne: Yes.

Mr T Clarke: What do you want? Do you want everyone to be able to do whatever they want?

Mr W Clarke: Are you chairing the meeting?

Mr T Clarke: I am asking you a question.

Mr W Clark: Are you chairing the meeting?

Mr T Clarke: No. Are you?

The Clerk of Bills: I am happy to explore this with the member separately and see whether there is a possibility of creating an amendment to enable the council to exercise discretion in respect of the transferred fee.

Mr T Clarke: How would they judge that? That is another minefield.

The Clerk of Bills: I am prepared to discuss that with the member anyway.

Mr T Clarke: The member could put down a separate amendment of his own.

The Chairperson: I do not have any issues with what you are bringing up, Willie. I would support that, but we do not have time now to amend this amendment, or reword it in any way.

Mr W Clarke: I am happy that the Committee went away and — *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]*

The Chairperson: The second issue under this clause was the introduction of an upper limit or cap on the level of fee charged by councils for a citizen to make a complaint about a high hedge. The Bill provides the power for the Department to do that through regulation, but it indicated to the Committee that it is unlikely to exercise that power unless there is a clear need to do so after the legislation has been operational for some time.

Members were concerned about the level of fees charged by some councils in England, and asked that a draft Committee amendment be drawn up that requires the Department to put in place a maximum fee. The Committee amendment, which is in members' information packs, sets a cap on complaint fees. In England, the fee is between zero and £650. If you had to pay £650, you would not be making a complaint, to be honest. I find it ridiculous that you would

pay £650 to make a complaint. What do members think of the idea of putting a cap on the fee?

Mr T Clarke: Why should there be a variation in the fee? A complaint is a complaint. A council has to take the same action regardless. I do not agree that we should set it at £600. The fee was for the council to assess the situation. We are really asking for a recovery of the council's costs. The council assesses the situation, and arbitrates between itself, the landowner and the complainant. Why should it ever cost £600 to start with? It should be a reasonable fee to start with.

Ms H Anderson: Some of that additional cost may be in a circumstance where you needed to bring in a tree specialist to give advice. For example, a very high hedge may need to be brought down in stages at particular times of the year.

The Chairperson: We asked for the cap because we want a reasonable fee. We did not want to see £600. Have you had any ideas about that?

Ms Stewart: Wales set the limit at £320.

Mr T Clarke: We are in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: That is £320 to make a complaint, Jennifer. That is a lot of money.

Mr McGlone: To pick up on what Helen said, if you are going down the route of bringing in arboriculturists and all that, £600 would not start to cover it.

The Chairperson: I do not disagree, but the whole element of this —

Mr McGlone: I am sorry, Chairperson, just to clarify: I am not making that as a case for upping the fee. I am saying that the fee is prohibitive as it is.

The Chairperson: I would say that complaints in England and Wales, especially in England at £600, reduced dramatically by 70% or 80%, but do not quote me on that.

Ms Stewart: I think that the average fee is £340.

The Chairperson: We have to be realistic here. Even £300 —

Mr T Clarke: If a council needed to engage someone, that would probably be only in the defence of the landowner refusing to bring a hedge down to a suitable height. Again, if the

person who has to get the hedge cut down wants to make the defence, it is up to them to provide the defence that they will bring their hedge down over time, so they should have to pay to forward that evidence to suggest that they will bring the hedge down to that height in that given time. Other than that, the council can suggest to bring the hedge down to 2 metres.

Ms H Anderson: The way that it is currently envisaged, and my understanding of the way that it happens in England, is that the remediation notice will indicate exactly how the hedge is to be brought down, and that could involve staging. There is a desire not to kill off anybody's hedge by requiring them to reduce the height of it too much at one time, or at an inappropriate time of the year. That is not always the case. It will very much depend on the circumstances. The discretionary element allows councils to charge whatever they deem reasonable in the circumstances.

The Chairperson: Where are all the councillors? How many members here are still on councils? Let us get a view on this.

Mr Kinahan: If trees end up being involved, there needs to be discretion for a higher figure because a whole different world of costs and expenses will be involved.

Mr T Clarke: It is not all trees, Danny; it is evergreens.

Mr Kinahan: It is all the same thing if they are big.

Mr T Clarke: What about a leylandii?

Mr Kinahan: A huge leylandii hedge would be very expensive to cut and trim. It is not an easy job.

The Chairperson: Jennifer, you made some indication of fees. Was it £200 or £300?

Mr Byrne: The average fee that was quoted in the public consultation was £320.

Mr T Clarke: Given that local government will administer this part of the legislation, was NILGA asked for its opinion on a fee?

The Chairperson: NILGA responded. Do you recollect what it said?

Ms Stewart: NILGA hoped that councils would work within the existing structures and that they would try to agree and — *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]*

The Chairperson: For clarification, before I let you in, Paul, NILGA stated:

"DOE should set a maximum fee and allow council discretion for concessions and refunds".

Mr T Clarke: Did it suggest what the maximum fee should be?

The Chairperson: No.

Mr Kinahan: The discretion, surely, is the key to the whole matter.

The Chairperson: We are content with the amendment. There is a suggestion that the fee should be capped. You mentioned £320; is that an average?

Mr Byrne: Yes; £300 or £320 seems to be reasonable given the average across England and Wales.

Ms H Anderson: We should point out that the figures that we are talking about have not been put to the Minister because the intention was to bring forward the legislation and work with the NILGA set-up to see whether councils could work out a figure among themselves and, if necessary, bring forward subordinate legislation to set that fee in future. The Minister has not been involved in this discussion.

The Chairperson: Obviously, it is through secondary legislation, which we would have a look at. It would go to consultation to see exactly what that fee would be. Is that correct?

Ms H Anderson: Yes. As it stands currently, it is not mandatory for us to consult. However, in light of the strong views in that regard, the Department would likely opt to. If there is a consultation, that will take a longer period of time. I am conscious that the Assembly has had issues in ensuring that bits of subordinate legislation that are necessary for the commencement are in place in the same time frame. We do not have to consult on that, but if the Committee feels strongly that there should be consultation before any figure is set in those regulations, that would elongate the timeline.

The Chairperson: Why can the Department not cap it?

Ms H Anderson: It could, but we have not yet had the conversation about capping the fee with the Minister. I think that it was only last night that we received the notification from the Committee about that issue.

Mr McGlone: I do not see any particular need to consult. That would delay things again. I am trying to distil everything in my mind. We either support the amendment or we do not. We can make a suggestion for the capping level.

The Chairperson: We would like the Department to cap it. It is talking about £320. I will ask for the views of the Committee, but I would prefer an amount less than £320. We are asking the Department to set a cap on it. Whatever that fee may be, we can make suggestions.

Mr McGlone: Although it has not been bounced across to the Minister, we have probably got a flavour of the thinking that is going on. It is down to us to ask for a cap to be set on fees.

The Chairperson: That is basically what the amendment says. Are members happy?

Mr T Clarke: But we would like less —

The Chairperson: OK, well, that will come. We are agreed here. We have agreed the transfer and the cap. Is the Committee content with clause 3 subject to the amendments proposed by the Committee to require councils to refund a fee to the complainant where a remedial notice is issued; to charge that fee to the hedge owner; and to require the Department to put in place, by regulation, an upper limit on the level of fee that councils can charge for complaints against a high hedge to be made?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 3, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 4 (Remedial notices)

The Chairperson: I remind members that in response to concerns raised on this clause, the Department stated that, to ensure proper maintenance of the hedge for the future, the remedial notice will specify the remedial action required; the timescale within which that should be carried out; and any ongoing maintenance requirements. If a hedge is extremely high, the remedial notice may also state that the height of the hedge should be reduced in stages over a specific period of time. The Department considered the possibility of using fixed-penalty notices for non-compliance, and has obviously discounted that option.

Members, we were previously content with the clause. Unless there are any comments, I will

put the question. Is the Committee content with clause 4 as drafted?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Mr T Clarke: Chair, just to go back to staged dropping of the tree: how will that be ascertained?

Mr Byrne: The staging will be ascertained through the council's employing an expert or making the determination itself. It is important to remember that no remedial action can result in the deliberate killing off of the hedge; that is the reason for the staging. A very high hedge would have to be reduced in stages, because if too much foliage was taken away at any one time, the hedge is likely to be killed off.

Mr T Clarke: Would the council still be covered for recovering that?

Mr Byrne: No, there is no mechanism for the council to recover the fee for the determination.

Mr T Clarke: You said that they could bring in an expert.

Mr Byrne: There will be a set administrative fee for bringing in the expert. The amendment will mean that that set fee can be recovered from the hedge owner.

Clause 5 (Withdrawal or relaxation of requirements of remedial notice)

The Chairperson: No issues were raised with this clause. Is the Committee content with clause 5 as drafted?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 5 agreed to.

The Chairperson: Thank you, gentlemen. Please speak up for the benefit of Hansard; "content" or "agreed" will do.

Mr T Clarke: Does clause 5 give the council the power to withdraw the notice?

Mr Byrne: Yes.

Mr T Clarke: So, who pays there? If we go back to where we were earlier, the complainant pays on receipt of the notice to do something about it, then the complainant gets their money back and now we are going to withdraw the notice after it has been served. What happens about fees?

Mr Byrne: That was one of the reasons why we rejected the first option, which was the transferral of the fees, because it introduces so many complications. The transfer of the fee would have to be made when the remedial notice became effective after any appeal would have taken place, so there are added complications with transferring a fee.

Mr T Clarke: I understand that, but why would we ever have the withdrawal or relaxation of a notice once it has been served? What is the purpose of that?

Mr Byrne: If the two neighbours decide that they have a different solution, the serving of the remedial notice places a legal obligation on the hedge owner.

If the neighbours agree a different solution and go to the council, the council has to have the power to be able to withdraw that notice because it is no longer a neighbours' dispute because they have agreed a different solution. It could be to leave the hedge, to totally remove the hedge, or something in between.

Ms Stewart: While the remedial notice is effective it remains a statutory charge on the hedge owner's property.

The Chairperson: Bear in mind, members, that we have gone through this and did not have any issue with it. We had a clear explanation the last time, but thanks for the clarification again.

Mr McGlone: I was looking for a bit of clarity on that myself. If, for example, a case goes for an appeal, does that clause empower the withdrawal of the remedial notice, or is the appeal itself empowered to neutralise, emasculate, reduce or whatever? This is separate, is it?

Mr Byrne: It is separate. The appeal can alter the remedial notice, withdraw it or strengthen it. That is a separate matter. This clause will actually give the council the power to change, withdraw or relax the remedial notice.

Clause 6 (Appeals against remedial notices and other decisions of councils)

The Chairperson: Guidance is currently being drafted in relation to the clause. The Department is engaging with the NI Courts and Tribunals Service and has held discussions with the NI Valuation Tribunal and taken account of

all the concerns. Before I put the question, do members wish to seek clarification?

Mr McGlone: To return to the appeals issue, I see that clause 6 states: “Where the council —

(a) issues a remedial notice,

(b) withdraws such a notice, or

(c) waives or relaxes the requirements of such a notice,”

You have just outlined the circumstances under which a council might withdraw, waive or relax the requirements of such a notice. Built into that is some sort of compatibility, compromise or agreement that both parties who could be subject to either the pursuant of that notice or compliance of that notice would be, if you like, empowered or covered by that withdrawal or relaxation of the requirements of the remedial notice. I am just intrigued about the circumstances under which there might be an appeal of the withdrawal, waiving or relaxing of such a notice.

Ms H Anderson: The complainant.

Mr McGlone: What I picked up earlier — perhaps I picked it up wrongly — was that, if the withdrawal or relaxation of the remedial notice had been done, one would presume that there would either be mediation, co-operation or collaboration between both parties. If you built in the appeal scenario to appeal against the withdrawal, waiving or relaxation of those requirements, you do not have much faith in what has preceded that.

Mr Byrne: We do have faith in what has preceded it, but it is allowing the —

Mr McGlone: Just if?

Mr Byrne: Just if, yes. It really is allowing for the “just if”. It is most likely that the appeals will be against the issue of the remedial notice or non-issue of the remedial notice, where both parties are not in agreement. If both parties are in agreement, it is unlikely that there will be an appeal, but we have to allow it, just in case they fall out again.

Mr T Clarke: I still have a problem with that, because when I asked the question, it was about circumstances where there had been consent by the two parties. Like Patsy, I cannot understand why it is in there. Surely there should

be something in clause 5 about how the withdrawal or relaxation can come about.

Ms H Anderson: There might potentially be a situation in which the council becomes aware of other information. Again, it is a hedge.

Mr T Clarke: If that is the case, it means that the council did not discharge its duty when it made the first notice. We are actually giving a get-out clause to the council. When I asked the question on that issue, I was told that it would occur when some deal had been done between the landowner and the complainant. It now seems that that is not the case, because you have also built in an appeal mechanism for someone to appeal against a withdrawal.

I am a wee bit concerned. Either it is done by the mutual consent of the complainant and landowner, or it is not, and that should be the only reason for a withdrawal. Before serving a notice, a council should have followed all paths open to it. Councils should not have a get-out clause either.

Ms H Anderson: I appreciate that the Committee is very keen to wrap this up today. If you let us consider that point this afternoon, we will come back to you tomorrow morning with clarification.

The Chairperson: We were hoping to get through this today. I have to say, gentlemen, that none of those points were raised last time. We had no issue with it, but now we have established an issue with it. We need to report by 17 December. Is there any chance of you coming up to Limavady?

Ms H Anderson: We are checking the guidance to see if we can clarify the matter before we leave.

The Chairperson: OK. Time is running out for us to report. We will pause for a while.

Ms H Anderson: We have checked the guidance. It is where there is a correction of an error. If a council has made a mistake in a remedial notice, it should withdraw it and issue a new one as soon as the error comes to its attention. Any alteration to the contents of a notice will usually require consequential changes to the operative date. So that is what that is about —

Mr T Clarke: I am not a happy bunny. I asked a question, which will be in the Hansard report, and the answer I got was not a reflection of

that. How much is the Department up to speed on its own Bill? The question was about clause 5: I was wondering why we have withdrawal notices? If Patsy McGlone had not seen that there is a mechanism for an appeal against a withdrawal, we would not have had that answer. What is the purpose of us scrutinising a Bill if the Department is not even up to speed on it? We seem to be rushing this stage in order to meet a deadline, but we are not giving the Bill the due care and attention that it needs.

Ms H Anderson: I apologise, and I take your point.

The Chairperson: That is fine, and I am not making apologies for anybody, but I will say that this is the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny process. I cannot even put it down to an oversight, because a clear explanation was given the last day you were here, and obviously members did not pick up on it. However, that is not the point. We have a date by which we need to report, but, unfortunately, we cannot go on today. It is now 2.00 pm. We need you to come to Limavady.

Ms H Anderson: On Thursday?

The Chairperson: Yes, on Thursday. We need to go through this again, so we need a proper explanation in response to the questions asked.

Ms H Anderson: Again, I apologise on behalf of the Department.

The Chairperson: We will stop now and revisit the matter on Thursday. Thank you very much.

Clause 6 referred for further consideration.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

8 December 2010

Transport Bill (NIA 29/09)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)
Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Leonard
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Conall McDevitt

Witnesses:

Ms Doreen Brown	<i>Department</i>
Mr Sean Johnston	<i>for Regional</i>
Mr Brian White	<i>Development</i>

The Chairperson (Mr Cobain): I draw members' attention to the draft text of the amendments to the Bill to date; additional information that has been provided by the Examiner of Statutory Rules on clause 45 of the Bill — the "Henry VIII clause"; a paper on formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Transport Bill, which was emailed to members on Monday 6 December 2010; and the third draft of the Committee's report on the Transport Bill, which was also emailed to members on Monday 6 December 2010. I remind members that the information from the Examiner of Statutory Rules is marked "Restricted" and should be treated accordingly.

The purpose of this meeting is to clarify a number of outstanding issues; take forward informal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the remaining clauses of the Transport Bill that were not fully addressed at last week's meeting; take forward formal clause-by-clause scrutiny, and consider the latest draft of the Committee's report to the Assembly. Departmental officials are in attendance to answer any questions that members might want to ask.

On Monday 6 December 2010, I met the Consumer Council to discuss, among other matters, the Committee's requirement to secure its written assurance on consultation with local councils on its transport forward work programmes. I refer members to the tabled correspondence from the Consumer Council providing that undertaking.

I refer members to two items of tabled correspondence from the Department, which include clarification on a number of outstanding issues and the draft text of all amendments to the Bill.

At our meeting on 1 December 2010, the Committee agreed to defer decisions and informal clause-by-clause scrutiny of a number of clauses, which are 1, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 23, 24, 43 and 45 to 47 until today's meeting, pending receipt of the wording of proposed amendments and clarification on a number of issues. The tabled memo from the Committee Clerk, and the Department's correspondence, provide that clarity.

If members are content, we will proceed in the following order: we will clarify outstanding issues on clauses 7, 14, 23, 24 and 43; consider the draft text of amendments to clauses 1, 6, 10, 12, 46 and 47; consider additional information on clause 45, which we have received from the Examiner of Statutory Rules; conduct formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill; and consider a third draft of the Committee's report on the Transport Bill. Are members content to progress in that order?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I draw members' attention to the Committee Clerk's memo, which is tabled in today's papers. It replaces the version in members' packs. You may find it useful to refer to that memo as we progress through the meeting. We will go quickly through the issues that were to be clarified, which are covered in paragraphs 3 to 9 of the Committee Clerk's memo.

The Committee Clerk: Members will recall that at the meeting on 1 December, we considered a number of clauses formally and deferred a number of issues on which clarification was needed. As stated in the tabled paper, decisions were deferred on clauses 7, 14, 23, 24, and 43. Clauses 7 and 14 were deferred because they refer to the Mental Health (Northern Ireland)

Order 1986. The memo in front of members contains an extract from the draft Committee report that reflects the discussion that took place at last week's meeting and how the Committee chose to deal with the issue of the Order and how it is referred to in clause 7:

"On consideration of all evidence received on clause 7(6)(b) the Committee was of the view that the Mental Health Order (Northern Ireland) 1986 was clearly outdated in approach and in need of reform and recommended that this be pursued with all reasonable and proper speed. Members recognised that possession of a bus operator's licence was a pre-requisite of the award of a permit, and hence the necessary link between the provisions in this Bill and the requirements of the Department of the Environment's bus operator's licence with regard to Article 2(2) of the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. The Committee also understands that once the planned Mental Capacity Bill has been enacted, together with the consequential repeals and amendments to other legislation arising from that Bill, that the provisions in relation to mental health issues and permits in this Bill will be amended to reflect the more modern, rights-based approach in the proposed Mental Capacity Bill.

Although this situation is far from satisfactory, the Committee decided it was the most practical in the short term, by ensuring that the modernisation of mental health legislation in the proposed Mental Capacity Bill would be coherently and consistently implemented in this, and other public transport related legislation.

In the interim, the Department has assured the Committee that provisions in clause 14 of the Bill can be used to transfer a permit in cases where the permit holder dies, or becomes a patient within the meaning of Article 2(2) of the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. The Committee also decided to write to both the Committee for the Environment and the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee on this matter."

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Miss McIlveen: Have we received responses from those Committees?

The Committee Clerk: Not yet. If they are received before next week, they can be tabled and reflected in the Committee's report.

The Chairperson: Clauses 23 and 24 relate to the Consumer Council. The issue concerns how

the Consumer Council will interact with local councils.

The Committee Clerk: There is an extract in the memo reflecting how that will be handled in the Committee report. Members have been provided with a copy of a letter from the Consumer Council providing the undertaking that the Committee requested.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk: Clause 43 makes provision for shared transport facilities. The evidence illustrated that there are different viewpoints as to what may be meant by the term "any place" in relation to access to shared facilities. The Committee decided that, rather than seek to put a definition of shared transport facilities on the face of the Bill, it would recommend that regulations made on access to shared services would be consulted on and would be subject to draft affirmative resolution. The Department was content with that. There is an extract from the Committee's report in the memo setting out the Committee's views and reflecting how the issue was handled. Members should note that no amendment has been made to clause 43 because the amendment is made at clause 46, which deals with regulation-making powers.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with the insertion of "sustainability" and "accessibility" to clause 1?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk: Paragraphs 13 and 14 of the memo show the text of the amendment to clause 1 and how the revised clause would read.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with the proposed amended clause 1(1)?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk: Paragraphs 15 to 17 of the memo deal with matters to which the Department would have regard. The amendment is about changing clause 6 to reflect representations from community transport operators. Again, the memo includes the text of

the amendment and how the revised clause will read.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We move to the proposed amendment to clause 10, revocation, suspension and curtailment of permits, and the non-payment of the national minimum wage.

The Committee Clerk: Again, the memo gives the text of the amendment and the impact it would have on the revised clause. The numbering will be adjusted when members indicate that they are content with the change.

Miss McIlveen: May I just ask a couple of questions? Do we have any information as to how many cases there have been of convictions in which employers had breached the national minimum wage?

The Chairperson: No.

Miss McIlveen: If we were to include this amendment, would it include those who have previously been convicted?

The Chairperson: No, I do not think that we can have retrospective legislation.

Miss McIlveen: Would it be taken into consideration during the assessment of prospective permit holders?

The Chairperson: When a permit is given, the rules would apply.

Miss McIlveen: But, would it not be taken into consideration as criteria at the time a permit is being given?

The Committee Clerk: We could ask the officials to come to the table. Previously, a briefing was provided on the issue of good reputation and the way in which the Department of the Environment assesses that. However, the officials could provide clarification.

Mr McDevitt: The reading of the proposed amended clause is that the power that it gives is the power to revoke, suspend or curtail a permit within reasonable cause, including “any of the following”. We are basically saying that one of “the following” will include the provision that the permit holder has been convicted of an offence under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. Therefore, if at any point in the past an

individual was convicted, that would be grounds for revocation according to the legislation as amended.

Mr Brian White (Department for Regional Development): That is not a question that we were expecting. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: This could be quite a delicate issue, because very little legislation is retrospective.

Mr White: In this case, the issue is that this provision relates to a permit that is in existence — sorry, I am a bit croaky this morning.

As I said, it relates to an existing permit and defines circumstances in which that permit can be revoked. It is difficult to envisage a situation in which a permit would be granted to an individual with outstanding, unspent convictions.

Miss McIlveen: But, a spent conviction will obviously not be considered, because doing so would discriminate against the permit applicant. Therefore, a spent conviction is not going to be taken into consideration.

Ms Doreen Brown (Department for Regional Development): If it is spent for the purpose of DOE's consideration of good reputation it will not be considered. Brian is right: the provision applies if there is a permit in existence and we are considering whether there are grounds to revoke, suspend or curtail that permit on the basis of a new conviction.

The Clerk of Bills: The legislation is not retrospective. A lot of legislation has criteria that people must meet. A similar analogy may be somebody undergoing a criminal record check before they go into a school. The Department has the discretion to look back, but, as was pointed out, when it is looking, it can revoke, suspend or curtail, so it has the discretion to use that information.

Miss McIlveen: I really wanted to know whether it would be a criterion for granting the permit in the first instance.

Mr Leonard: Surely, the good reputation ethos would cover that when it comes to considering awarding the permit in the first place. After that, what is in the legislation, which is what we are talking about this morning, would take care of the operational issues.

The Chairperson: Yes, but I assume that that would apply in the case of a company being fined or prosecuted around that issue. We could not look back in time and tell a company that it was prosecuted 10 years ago. These permits are new. I am not sure, but I do not think that we can have retrospective legislation unless it is specifically granted. Legislation applies from the day that it is made. Therefore, it does not matter what someone who applies for a permit did 10 years previously. It matters only what is happening when they apply for that permit. Is that where we are?

Mr White: There are two things in play. The first is that the legislation that we are looking at relates to the permit. However, it is interrelated to arrangements for issuing licences in the first place, which have been around for some time. There are circumstances in which people who have been guilty of offences would be precluded from getting licences. That provision exists.

The Chairperson: That is in another place, isn't it?

Mr White: Yes, but it exists and will be carried forward.

Mr McDavitt: I am comfortable with that, Chairperson, for two reasons. First, it does not place a statutory duty on the Department to do it: it does not say "shall" it says "may". Secondly, Mr Leonard's point is well made. As I read it, nothing in this will take away from existing good repute provisions. Therefore, it does exactly what we wished it to do, which was to highlight and explicitly state that this issue of —

The Chairperson: And give information to workers in a company that they have a right to —

Mr McDavitt: — Yes.

The Chairperson: — I mean all of that is in this.

Miss McIlveen: I am fine with it. I just wanted clarification.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the proposed amendment to clause 10?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We now move to clause 12.

The Committee Clerk: Paragraphs 22 and 23 of the memo set out the proposed amendment

to clause 12 and how the revised clause would read. This provides for cases where, if a decision were taken for a service operating under a permit, it would be in the public interest to bring that into the regulated network. There would be a revocation process, and that process would also include a period of notice, and an appeals and inquiry mechanism. The clause is being amended to cover all cases in which revocation will happen.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We now move to "Regulations", which are clauses 42 and 43. The Committee decided that it wished to amend the Bill to ensure that regulations provided for that create or amend criminal offences be subject to draft affirmative procedure of the Assembly, rather than negative resolution.

The Committee Clerk: In line with previous decisions, the Committee agreed that powers where offences would be created in regulation would be subject to draft affirmative, rather than negative, resolution. There was also the issue with clause 43, concerning the regulations that will provide for access to shared transport facilities. That would allow for fuller debate at that point, rather than put an amendment in the Bill. As the process rolls out and the public transport reform programme is embedded, and as detail becomes available about what may, and will, want be shared, that will be subject to a view from the Committee at SL1 stage. However, there would also be draft affirmative procedures, and debate, or an opportunity for debate, on the Floor of the House.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We move to "Enforcement".

The Committee Clerk: In order to provide for flexibility and joined-up working between the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development on the enforcement and inspection regimes that already exist in the DOE for driver and vehicle licensing, and to create synergies between the working of those two Departments, the Department is seeking to amend this clause to bring within the definition of authorised persons the enforcement staff in the DOE. The text is set

out at paragraph 29, and the revised wording is set at paragraph 30.

The Chairperson: OK. We are now on to the “Henry VIII clause”.

The Committee Clerk: The members’ information packs include additional information that the Examiner of Statutory Rules was asked to provide. There are examples of what are called “Henry VIII” clauses from other legislation, and from other jurisdictions. Last week, members deferred consideration until they had a chance to look at that information from the Examiner of Statutory Rules. Members may wish to change their view after having read that information.

Mr McDevitt: I note the advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules in that he is not really giving us specific advice on this issue. He is leaving it to our discretion. When I read that, I still feel very uncomfortable about the basic principle.

It is a highly permissive Bill, with a huge amount of secondary legislation. When you look through precedents in other devolved Administrations, and at Westminster, it still appears to me that that is normally applied in Bills with much tighter scope than this Bill. I suppose that you could mount an argument for being able to take powers to make significant changes within Bills that are reasonably tightly scoped out. However, given that this Bill covers three or four different aspects of transport policy, and as the officials themselves said at the beginning of our evidence sessions a few months ago, it really should not be called a transport Bill; it should be called a miscellaneous something Bill. It is that big and wide ranging. Given its permissiveness, I still suggest that we have that struck off the Bill.

Miss McIlveen: I agree with Conall. Having read the information from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, that is my opinion. I understand that the Minister has agreed that it can be removed from the Bill, so do we need to go any further?

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Leonard: When the Examiner gives the technical perspective, he says “however” or “having said that”. Therefore, there is obviously room to manoeuvre, and our thinking from previous meetings still pertains.

The Chairperson: OK. We need to formally read this into the Hansard report.

Clause 1 (provision of public passenger transport services)

The Chairperson: The Committee for Regional Development recommends to the Assembly that clause 1(1) be amended to read as follows: “The Department must secure the provision of public passenger transport services with due regard to accessibility, economy, efficiency, safety of operation and sustainability.”

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clauses 2 to 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Matters to which Department must have regard)

The Chairperson: The Committee for Regional Development recommends to the Assembly that clauses 6(2)(1) be amended to remove the words “public passenger transport.” The Committee recommends that clause 6 be amended to add the following: “(3) In subsection (2)(b)(i) ‘services’ means -

(a) public passenger transport services; or

(b) any other services to which section 33(1)(a) applies.”

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clauses 7 to 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Revocation, suspension and curtailment of permits)

The Chairperson: The Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 10 be amended to add the following: After clause 10(1)(g) insert: “() that the permit-holder has been convicted of an offence under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 (c. 39).”

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 10 agreed to.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Revocation, disqualifications, etc., supplementary provisions)

The Chairperson: The Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 12 be amended to add the following after clause 12(1)(b): “() This subsection applies where-

“(a) an application is made for a new permit in respect of a service for which there is an existing permit;

(b) the applicant is the holder of the existing permit; and

(c) the Department considers that it is in the public interest for that service to be provided under a service agreement.

() Where subsection (a) applies, the Department shall not refuse the application without first giving the applicant notice that it is considering refusing the application for the reason mentioned in paragraph (c) of that subsection and holding an inquiry if the applicant requests the Department to do so.”

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 12, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clauses 13 to 44 agreed to.

Clause 45 (Supplementary provisions)

The Chairperson: The Committee opposes the question that clause 45 stand part of the Bill.

Clause 45 disagreed to.

Clause 46 (Regulations – general)

The Chairperson: I propose that the Committee for Regional Development recommends to the Assembly that clause 46 be amended to substitute for clause 46(3), the following: “(3) No regulations to which this subsection applies shall be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly.

(3A) Subsection (3) applies to regulations under this Act if they include -

(a) regulations under section 42(3) or 43(2); or

(b) regulations under this section which make the declaration mentioned in subsection (4).

(3B) Any other regulations.”

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 46, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 47 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: I propose that the Committee for Regional Development recommends to the Assembly that clause 47 be amended to substitute, for the definition of “authorised person”, the following: “‘authorised person’, except in section 42, means

(a) any person authorised in writing by the Department for the purposes of this Act; or

(b) an examiner appointed by the Department of the Environment under Article 74 of the 1995 Order.”

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 47, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clauses 48 to 50 agreed to.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: That concludes the Committee's formal clause-by-clause examination of the Transport Bill. Having formally considered the clauses, are members content that the comments made today are reflected in the Committee's report on the Bill?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content that to take forward consideration of the next draft of the Committee's report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I refer members to the draft report that was emailed to them on 6 December.

The Committee Clerk: The first text that was amended since the last version of the report

is on page 8 at paragraphs 24 and 25. As the Chairperson said, the draft report was emailed to members on 6 December. There are also copies on the Table if members need them. I am sorry that the quality of the photocopies is not great. If members will take their ease for two minutes, we will get clearer versions.

The Chairperson: We will have another meeting next Wednesday to sign off the report. We will run through the report even though the printing is not great. If there are any issues we can deal with them next week. The amendments we agreed earlier have been included in the relevant paragraphs in the report.

Paragraphs 29, 30, 33, 38, 39, 42, 43, 47, 56, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 67, 71, 72, 73, 77, 100 and 104 agreed to.

Mr McDevitt: I have a really silly question, but what about paragraph 101?

The Committee Clerk: Paragraph 101 will be the text of the amendment that we agreed today.

The Chairperson: These will be inserted and we will see the final draft next week.

Mr McDevitt: Thanks, Chairperson.

Paragraphs 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 123, 133, 136, 140, 141, 142, 143, 147, 148, 149, 150, 156, 176, 179, 180, 183, 192, 193, 197, 201, 202, 205, 206, 207, 215, 222, 240, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 258, 259, 261, 262, 263, 285, 288, 289, 290, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 310, 311, 312, 313, 315, 316 agreed to.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Environment

9 December 2010

High Hedges Bill (NIA 15/09)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Cathal Boylan (Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr John Dallat
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Ms Helen Anderson	
Mr Paul Byrne	<i>Department of the</i>
Mr Denis McMahon	<i>Environment</i>
Ms Jennifer Stewart	

The Chairperson (Mr Boylan): We welcome Denis McMahon, Paul Byrne, Helen Anderson and Jennifer Stewart from the Department of the Environment (DOE). They are with us to discuss the High Hedges Bill.

We previously got to clause 5, so we will start at clause 6. A few questions were asked about that. We will go through each clause and get a response from you. Hopefully, Mr Weir will be back by that time, so we can try to get agreement on the clauses. [Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.] We will revisit clause 6 and the issue of appeals against remedial notices and other decisions of councils. I remind members that guidance on that clause is being drafted. The Department is engaging with the NI Courts and Tribunals Service and has held discussions with the Valuation Tribunal and taken account of its concerns. Trevor Clarke had asked a question about that.

Mr T Clarke: Although we formally accepted clause 5, as we discovered later, the information on it may not have been accurate. Perhaps that is the best way to put it. I would prefer that we revisit clause 5 before going to clause

6 so that we can clear up any issues with that information.

The Chairperson: We would like clarification on clause 5.

Mr Denis McMahon (Department of the Environment): The key thing about clause 5 is that it is a normal provision for the purposes of providing flexibility in the event that circumstances change between the time that a notice is issued and when it takes effect. For example, if a complainant moves house and the subsequent owner decides that they do not mind the height of the hedge or they would like it to be higher because they want a bit of privacy, the flexibility in that situation would be allowed.

Mr T Clarke: I do not want to prolong this issue any longer than necessary. I do not want to rehearse what was said at the previous meeting, but, given what was said then, we could probably understand it and reach an agreement. However, we did not actually explore it, because a lot of what we talked about before we got to clause 5 was about who pays and at what stage someone does not pay. When I study it further, I find a problem with it. If there is an agreement, the complainant has paid the council to take action after following all the council's informal guidance. The council then serves notice and takes money off the person with the high hedge. If an agreement is then reached, even with a withdrawal notice, does the complainant still get their money back at that stage? Can you clarify that? Where are we with fees if there is a withdrawal notice?

Mr McMahon: That would depend on the specific circumstances. One of the problems is that any of those notices will apply over the longer term. Therefore, the issue is not just about cutting down the hedge; it is about the maintenance of the hedge. For example, someone may get a notice because that is the only way to resolve the dispute, and the hedge is cut down accordingly and is maintained to that level. Someone else may move in a year later and say that they do not mind the hedge or want it higher. The point is to allow such flexibility in those situations. In that case, if it was a year later, would it be appropriate to pay the complainant? The complainant got what they wanted and got the issue resolved while they were there.

Mr T Clarke: They got it resolved, but at that stage, they have paid already. Is there still a provision for the complainant to get their money back?

Mr McMahon: There is a provision for the complainant to get their money back anyway at the discretion of the council, if the circumstances provide for it. However, I stand to be corrected on that. The point that I am making is that it would not necessarily be automatically linked with the change in the notice, if you know what I mean.

Mr T Clarke: OK; I am content with clause 5.

The Chairperson: We agreed clause 5 at the previous meeting, but we wanted an explanation of it. Mr McGlone is not here, but both he and Trevor Clarke raised an issue about clause 6, which deals with appeals against remedial notices. Unfortunately, we cannot agree it, but I want clarification on the point that was raised. Can you remember back to that issue, Mr Clarke?

Mr T Clarke: It was because there was confusion about clause 5. Even though I am satisfied with the explanation that I got today, I wonder why there would be an appeal against a decision, when, under the provisions that clause 5 will introduce, everybody should be content with the relaxation or withdrawal of the notice. Why would anybody appeal against that?

Mr McMahon: Without having been at the previous meeting, and I apologise for that, my understanding is that the concern is that someone may make a mistake and put something incorrect on the remedial notice. Why should that be allowed to happen, with the result that there would be a lead-in to a big appeal process? The concern was that the explanation that had been given previously was to do with mistakes potentially happening with the notice. I will perhaps take this back a step: what I am trying to say is that, no matter how tightly we define it, there will have to be an element of judgement. We can, and will, give a lot of guidance, and we will work with councils on that. Ultimately, however, judgements will have to be made about the issues on a case-by-case basis. It all means that, if a council makes a judgement, a notice will need to be issued. The clause really just allows an appeal against that judgement, because people may disagree and say that the guidance has been applied incorrectly.

The Chairperson: It is an appeals mechanism.

Mr McMahon: It is a normal appeals mechanism, absolutely.

The Chairperson: The person is entitled to appeal against it, and that is what we are putting in.

Mr McMahon: Yes.

Mr T Clarke: I understand the appeal against the remedial notice, but I cannot understand the appeal against the withdrawal.

Mr McMahon: That goes back to the example that you gave earlier. For example, a complainant may have gone through the whole process and got to a certain point. The council may suddenly say that something has changed and that it is going to remove the remedial notice. The complainant might ask why the council suddenly changed its mind, especially after they went through the whole process and got where they needed to get to. At that point, if the complainant was not satisfied, they could challenge that decision.

Mr Paul Byrne (Department of the Environment): The Bill is an attempt to cover all circumstances. For instance, if the complainant sells up to a commercial concern, which puts in a car park and asks the council to alter the remedial notice, the hedge owner can say that the remedial notice no longer applies and that they wish to withdraw it. The problem is that, for planning purposes, the commercial concern may wish the hedge to be maintained for the car park. There is therefore a need to allow an appeal against that decision.

Mr McMahon: The key point to get across is that we do not expect that provision to be used. It is a normal catch-all in the event that a complainant makes a complaint, which goes through to remedial notice, and, for some reason, the council decides that, according to its guidance, the remedial notice should no longer apply. However, the complainant might say that it should still apply. The point is really just to allow the complainant or the hedge owner to say that that notice should or should not apply.

The Chairperson: It is a difficult one to explain, to be fair.

Mr T Clarke: Given what is in clause 5, if a mistake with the withdrawal is made under that clause, people need to be given the entitlement

to appeal what they have determined is a wrong decision.

Mr Byrne: That is exactly it.

Mr T Clarke: My difficulty is that I cannot understand how people would ever withdraw. I am not trying to revisit the clause, but once people have gone through the whole process and served notice, I cannot see why they would ever want to appeal.

Mr McMahon: One of the challenges is to understand that, with any of the notices, the issue is not just the initial cutting down of the hedge. The point is that notices could be in place for a number of years, so there has to be a certain amount of flexibility, because a lot could change. As I said, the hedge owner could move, and someone else could say that they think that there is now a different set of circumstances.

The council could review its policy and say that, in the light of the most recent guidance, a notice that it issued a year ago does not apply any more. In that case, the council could decide that the notice no longer applied and the complainant who was still living at the same address could protest. The point is to allow that degree of flexibility.

Mr T Clarke: It gives a degree of cover, I suppose. If a council makes a wrong decision, I can see that the complainant has protection against the council as well.

Mr McMahon: That is exactly it.

Ms Helen Anderson (Department of the Environment): That is particularly the case, given, as you will recall that the Bill deals with people's personal enjoyment of their property, which includes hedges. It provides a degree of cover to ensure that everyone's human rights are provided for in any eventuality.

The Chairperson: You have seen examples of the complaints that people make and the situations that they can get into. People will go by the letter of the law when they make complaints, and we have to have those mechanisms in place for challenges and for protection. Are you happy enough with that explanation, Mr Clarke?

Mr T Clarke: Yes.

The Chairperson: I will go through the clauses, and, hopefully, Mr Weir will be back. I just want clarification on some points. Clause 7 deals with the determination or withdrawal of appeals. Thankfully, no issues were raised in the previous meeting about that clause. Clause 8 concerns powers of entry. I remind members that, where calls are concerned, council officers should be permitted to enter any land to enable proper assessment and that notice should have to be given only where necessary. The Department has indicated that, given the need for respect for privacy and family life, reasonable notice of intended entry needs to be given to an occupier of land. The standard practice is to give 24 hours' notice. The Department also noted that it is not necessary to give notice to an owner who is not an occupier of the land in question. Notice does not have to be given if an officer is invited on to land. That seems pretty clear. Do members have any comments to make about the powers of entry?

Mr W Clarke: Will a code of conduct be drawn up that sets out guiding principles?

Mr Byrne: That will be in the guidance. This issue is to do with human rights, so there will be a code of conduct.

The Chairperson: Clause 9 concerns offences. I remind members that concerns were expressed that problems will arise in determining which owner/occupier should be taken through the courts. It would be burdensome to take everyone concerned to court. The Department replied that it would not be appropriate to single out one individual, as the identification of an individual where several people may be involved could lead to unintentional discrimination. The clause ensures equal treatment of all. Several respondents called for the use of a fixed penalty notice option as an enforcement tool in the event of non-compliance with a remedial notice. The Department has, obviously, discounted that option, as there is a risk that hedge owners could pay the fixed penalty and not address the problem of the hedge, which is possibly the costlier element, and after that, there would be no comeback for councils.

Mr McMahon: Again, the latter point refers to the fact that such issues take place over a long period. If I go back to the former point, I should say that we would not necessarily see taking action against multiple owners happening all the time. Not many of those disputes happen

between groups of people, but, in the event that there is a dispute about the location and ownership of a hedge, the Bill provides enough cover to ensure that we are not missing anybody who should be included. We have a concern that picking on an individual in such circumstances could create challenges. It would bring us back to the appeals process.

The Chairperson: Clause 10 deals with the power to require the occupier to permit action to be taken by the owner. No issues were raised about that. Clause 11 is “Action by council”. I remind members that concerns were expressed about the fact that the Department will expect councils to act in default where a property is vacant. However, the Department indicated that there would be no obligation on councils to act in a default situation, as it is a discretionary power. In response to suggestions that it would be cheaper to remove a hedge where landowners could not be traced, the Department stated that the removal of a hedge without the hedge owner’s permission would constitute criminal damage.

We have concerns about circumstances in which no one is available to be held to account for the condition of a hedge. I am happy enough with the explanation that has been given. Do members have any comments to make on that?

Hopefully, we will also be able to deal with the vacant property issue. Most owners of those properties should have been identified through Land and Property Services by now. However, there is a gap and, hopefully, through this piece of legislation, we will try to get to —

Mr T Clarke: Chairman, will the part of the clause that refers to “neighbouring land” give councils the power to go on to the land of someone who is not the hedge owner? Am I reading that right?

Mr McMahon: It would be a hedge owner. However, it would be a vacant property, and councils would be able to go on to that property. The issue is about removing hedges; councils can cut down hedges —

The Chairperson: Yes; it would be criminal damage if a hedge was removed without consent.

Mr T Clarke: It says in the clause that councils will have the power to “enter the neighbouring land”.

Mr McMahon: That is right. I stand to be corrected, but as I understand it, this clause will give councils the power to cut a hedge down to a height of 2 m. However, they will not be able to remove hedges.

Mr Byrne: In the Bill, the term “neighbouring land” means the land in which hedges are situated.

Mr T Clarke: “Neighbouring” makes it sound as though it is —

Mr Byrne: Yes; it makes it sound like it is the next property. In the Bill, the term “neighbouring land” is defined as the land that contains the hedge.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Clauses 12, 13 and 14 deal with offences committed by a corporate body, the service of documents in electronic form, and statutory charges. No issues were raised about them.

Clause 15 deals with interpretation. I remind members that NILGA expressed a view that the Department should give more detailed guidance as to what it means by “access” in the context of determining whether a hedge is the subject of a justified complaint. The Department stated that the words “or access” had been removed from the Bill following the public consultation, as the use of those words had caused confusion and uncertainty about the definition of a high hedge. Of course, the jury is still out on what a high hedge is and whether a single leylandii tree should be included. However, we will not debate that.

NILGA also called for guidance on the potential creation of peepholes in hedges and what would be deemed acceptable. The Department stated that guidance will include the issue of gaps in hedges. Do you have any comments to make on that?

Ms Jennifer Stewart (Department of the Environment): We will be preparing detailed guidance for councils to help them through the process. There will also be guidance for the complainant and the hedge owner so that they know what to expect. All the issues that were raised will be covered in the guidance, which should be available before the legislation comes into effect.

The Chairperson: No issues were raised about clauses 16 to 20, which deal with power to amend sections 1 and 2, application to the Crown, regulations and orders, and commencement. No

issues were raised about the long title. We will ratify all that when Peter Weir comes back.

Those were all the questions that we have on the outstanding clauses of the High Hedges Bill. Thank you for clarifying Mr Clarke's point. We all had a difficult time getting up here in the snow, and I appreciate your taking the time to come up. Could you please stay so that we can ratify things when Mr Weir comes back?

Mr Byrne: I am here for the next session anyway.

The Chairperson: We now move back to the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the High Hedges Bill.

Clause 6 (Appeals against remedial notices and other decisions of councils)

The Chairperson: We received further clarification on this clause. Mr CLarke, are you happy enough with that clarification?

Mr T Clarke: Yes

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Powers of entry)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought clarification from the Department, and we were satisfied with the explanation.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Offences)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought clarification in relation to this clause, and we were content with that clarification.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 agreed to.

Clause 11 (Action by council)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought some clarification in relation to this clause. I think that we are happy enough with the explanation.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clauses 12 to 14 agreed to.

Clause 15 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: We expressed some concerns about this clause and sought some clarification from the Department, and we are happy enough with that clarification.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 15 agreed to.

Clauses 16 to 20 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: That concludes the Committee's formal clause-by-clause consideration of the High Hedges Bill. A report will be brought back to the Committee in the next couple of weeks.

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 26 November 2010

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Visit by Pope Benedict XVI

Mr P J Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have received any indication that Pope Benedict XVI plans to visit Ireland in 2012.

(AQW 787/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Our Department has not received official notification of a visit of the Pope.

Ministerial Subcommittee on Poverty and Social Inclusion

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many times the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion has met to date; and what actions have been taken forward following the meetings.

(AQW 1359/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: To date, the Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion has met on three occasions, the most recent meeting being held on 29 March 2010. During the course of its first three meetings it:

- agreed its Terms of Reference;
- was informed as to the extent of poverty here;
- considered and agreed key co-ordinated priority actions that are needed to benefit those areas, groups and individuals and particularly those families and children in greatest objective need;
- agreed that further action should be taken in respect of areas such as childcare, intensive family support, budget allocation using objective need indicators and rural gain;
- considered and agreed proposals in respect of a monitoring and reporting framework for the 'Lifetime Opportunities' Strategy – this was subsequently published on Thursday 14 October and is available for download on the OFMDFM website ; and
- agreed to the early re-establishment of the Ministerial-led Poverty and Social Inclusion Stakeholder Forum. The first meeting of this group took place on 2 June 2010.

It is our intention to convene further meetings of both the Executive Sub-Committee and the Stakeholder Forum before the end of this calendar year.

Budget of the Community Relations Council and the Human Rights Commission

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the budget of (i) the Community Relations Council; and (ii) the Human Rights Commission for each of the last five years.

(AQW 1790/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Community Relations Council (CRC) is an independent company with charitable status and it publishes a full set of accounts each year. OMFDPM provides funding to CRC for good relations work and to support victims and survivors work. Details of this funding are included in the table below. The majority of this funding is distributed to community and voluntary sector organisations to support their work.

It should be noted that in addition to the schemes included in the figures shown below, CRC is also responsible for the administration of funds on behalf of the International Fund for Ireland and the Special European Programmes Body. Further information is available on the CRC website: <http://www.nicrc.org.uk>

Description	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Good Relations Funding	2,858,000	2,936,250	3,289,882	3,340,830	3,547,000
Victims Funding	2,872,196	3,174,932	3,142,085	4,046,576	5,237,653
Total OFMDPM funding to CRC	5,730,196	6,111,182	6,431,967	7,387,406	8,784,653

This department does not provide funding for the Human Rights Commission. The funding is provided by the Northern Ireland Office. Details of funding for the Human Rights Commission are available on the organisation's website: <http://www.nihrc.org>.

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Miss M McIlveen asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the annual spend by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in each year since its establishment in 2003.

(AQW 1830/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The annual spend by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People since 2003 is detailed below:

	Annual spend (£)
6 months to 31/03/2004	413,380
31/03/2005	1,549,042
31/03/2006	1,858,008
31/03/2007	1,909,685
31/03/2008	1,867,605
31/03/2009	1,790,275
31/03/2010	1,868,129

The figure in 2010 includes retention of receipts totalling £35k from the Older People's Advocate for rent and shared services.

2010 Multiple Deprivation Indicator

Mr F Cobain asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what impact the 2010 Multiple Deprivation Indicator will have on planning and setting targets within the Executive.

(AQO 376/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010 was published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency in March 2010 replacing the 2005 Measure as the official measure of spatial deprivation in Northern Ireland.

The Multiple Deprivation Measure provides information on seven types or 'domains' of deprivation: income, employment, health & disability, education skills & training, proximity to services, living environment, crime & disorder, and an overall multiple deprivation measure.

Public sector bodies make use of spatial deprivation measures to identify and target resources on areas of disadvantage.

Other spending programmes are targeted on individuals or groups in need. These are complementary to spatial initiatives. Taken together these programmes support the aims of the Executive to target those in most objective need.

Although Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency officials provide advice on the appropriate use of the Multiple Deprivation Measure, the decision as to whether and how to include it within individual programmes rests with departments and public sector bodies themselves.

Visit by Pope Benedict XVI

Mr P J Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 787/11, whether they received any indication that Pope Benedict XVI plans to visit Ireland in 2012.
(AQW 1997/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Our Department has not received official notification of a visit of the Pope.

Representations to Sir Jon Shortridge by Senior Civil Servants

Mr P McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many senior civil servants (i) sought; and (ii) received authorisation to make representations to Sir Jon Shortridge during his investigation into the Department for Regional Development and NI Water; and at what level was authorisation granted.
(AQW 2370/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Sir Jon Shortridge conducted his own independent investigation.

The terms of reference and the scope of the investigation were provided to the Public Accounts Committee and the Regional Development Committee and subsequently published on 1 September 2010.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

European Commission Disallowance

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development from what source funding was obtained to offset the financial pressures arising from European Commission disallowance in relation to the Single Farm Payment, in each relevant financial year in which disallowance were applied.
(AQW 725/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Disallowances in respect of scheme years 2004-2008 have been accounted for in financial year 2009/10. The sources of funding were as follows:-

- a provision in respect of disallowance held by Defra on behalf of the devolved administrations;
- DARD non-Budget expenditure;

- DARD internal reallocations;
- A bid for additional funding agreed by the Executive, as part of the in-year monitoring process;
- 2009/10 underspends at overall NI Block level that emerged post year-end which were not available for reallocation by the Executive in 2009/10.

Staff Overtime

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department paid in staff overtime in the 2009/10 financial year.

(AQO 355/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The amount paid in staff overtime in the 2009-10 financial year was £3,092,653.

Throughout the Department, overtime working is essential for a diverse number of activities and reasons. Examples are:

Flood Alleviation. This was a significant problem in the recent [winter] months, to which the Department was required to respond quickly and effectively. There are two aspects to flood alleviation:

- Emergency events. Flooding can occur at any time and will, by the nature of the events, require immediate responses from the Department, at any time of the day or night. As stated, this was a major problem in [the recent winter in which there were significant instances of flooding, particularly in Fermanagh] to which our staff responded speedily and professionally.
- Construction Projects. By necessity, some construction projects must be completed within a defined period of time to avoid disruption to the public; this may require work to be carried out outside of normal working hours. In addition, it may be more efficient and provide better value for money to extend working hours to complete a project to enable movement to a different works site the following day.

Meat Inspections. Within DARD, our Veterinary Public Health Unit (VPHU) is responsible, on behalf of the Foods Standard Agency, for the delivery of official controls in approved meat premises in order to protect public health & animal health and welfare. Most of the tasks carried out by VPHU are statutory requirements. For example, an Official Veterinarian must be present during the slaughter of livestock species. As these meat premises work beyond nine-to-five, these activities cannot be undertaken within normal working hours. [Indeed some of these premises operate on a 24-hour basis, 7 days a week].

Portal Cover. Inspection of livestock and luggage is required at airports and ports to ensure that import rules and regulations are followed. These inspections are vital in preventing the entry of potentially devastating foreign diseases such as Foot-and-Mouth Disease or Bluetongue virus. I take the threat of epizootic animal disease very seriously since the impacts are very high for the farming industry and for Government. My Portal Officers work in shift patterns, in accordance with the schedules of the air and sea carriers to prevent delays or interruptions to busy trading routes from Britain, the EU and further afield.. Therefore overtime working is essential in this busy frontline post.

CAFRE Activities. Overtime is essential due to the College's responsibilities for student welfare for under-18 year-old residential students, for farm duties during the calving, lambing and harvest season and for the delivery of training courses and workshops to farmers in the evenings when farmers are available to attend.

Rural White Paper

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress in relation to the Rural White Paper.

(AQO 361/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Rural White Paper Stakeholder Advisory Group completed its work earlier this year following which its recommendations were formally considered by

DARD and the other Departments with responsibility for rural issues. DARD is continuing to engage with other Departments with a view to identifying realistic and meaningful actions for inclusion in the Rural White Paper. I discussed the development of the Rural White Paper with Minister Carey at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in Dublin last week and I am also currently undertaking a series of bi-lateral meetings with some of my Ministerial colleagues in the north of Ireland. I remain committed to working towards issuing a draft Rural White Paper for consultation by 31 March 2011.

Flood Alert System

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the Rivers Agency has any plans to set up a flood alert system similar to the system used in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 1960/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency has no legislative or discretionary powers to set up a flood alert system similar to the system used in Britain

Down Area Rural Partnership

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the total budget allocated to the Down Area Rural Partnership for the current financial year; (ii) the total expenditure incurred on projects by the Partnership during the financial year to date; and (iii) the Partnership's total committed expenditure for the remainder of the financial year.

(AQW 2059/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Down Area Rural Partnership are contracted with the department to implement Axis 3 of the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-13 in its area of operation in accordance with their agreed Axis 3 Implementation plan. (i) For the current financial year the budget set out in the implementation plan is £2,133,467;

(ii) The total expenditure incurred on projects by the Partnership during the financial year to date is £89,788; and the Partnership's total committed expenditure for the remainder of the financial year is £1,151,938.

Efficiency Savings

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to what extent she intends to prioritise efficiency savings over cuts in preparation for the next Budget.

(AQW 2063/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Executive is currently assessing the implications of the Spending Review announcement. It is too early to say with certainty what this will mean for the DARD budget as the Executive Budget review group are still discussing wider budget issues. During the Budget period 2011-2015, the Department faces a number of challenges. Evidently, there is a risk that there will be insufficient resources to carry forward the current level of services and meet customer expectations. My priority is to maintain the efficient provision of priority front line services, and bear down on administration.

At this stage, it is too early to say how my Department would deliver any savings the Executive decides upon.

Cost of Translating and Publishing Documents in Irish

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost of (i) translating; and (ii) publishing all documents associated with her Department in Irish in each of the last four years.

(AQW 2081/11)

MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT:

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Translation Costs	592.52	4,303.75	1,805.20	2,019.92
Publishing Costs				

It has not been possible to provide publishing costs for those documents translated into Irish as the majority of translations were either in response to letters received in Irish, Ministerial Forewords / Executive summaries to main documents which it has not been possible to isolate the publishing costs of, or documents which were published on the Internet only and no costs were incurred in publishing.

Departmental Officials: Procedures When Entering a Farm

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the procedures that must be followed by Departmental officials when entering a farm; and under what circumstances her officials can enter a farm without first having to inform the farmer or owner.

(AQW 2093/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Procedures that must be followed when entering a farm.

Officials carry an authorised DARD warrant card which lists the relevant legislation for their work.

DARD officers must show their authorisation if requested to do so.

Circumstances under which an official can enter a farm without having to first inform the farmer or owner.

Duly authorised DARD officers have legal powers to enter any premises, excluding the dwelling house, at a reasonable time for the purposes of carrying out inspections under the legislation for which DARD has responsibility.

Whilst officials normally give prior notice they may visit a farm and carry out an inspection unannounced:

- When there is a suspected offence or breach of regulations.
- When further action is required in relation to an inspection.
- When the inspection involves livestock or livestock related issues.

Agrifood

Mr D McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why she has yet to submit a draft plan to reduce the administrative burden on the agri-food sector by 15% by 2011 and 25% by 2013.

(AQO 546/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department issued its response to the Better Regulation Review on 18 May 2010. Since then the department has been actively taking forward an extensive programme of work to give effect to the 61 recommendations put forward by the Independent Panel which have been accepted or accepted in principle. Part of my departments response was a commitment to develop an action plan to implement, monitor and review the accepted recommendations. Systems have been put in place which will measure these outcomes in due course. Whilst progress in producing the action plan has been slower than I would have liked, the delay has been due to complicated issues which required my Department to co-ordinate activities with other Departments and also across several business areas. A presentation of the draft action plan will be given to the ARD Committee tomorrow. My intention is to publish the final action plan in early December.

We have not waited until now to improve our approach, for instance we have put in place an electronic identification system for sheep and goats which was supported and welcomed by the industry. Moreover in July 2009, we secured a very important derogation from Brussels benefiting flock keepers with the introduction of the sheep electronic identification system (EID); the concession provides central points of recording reducing the administrative burden on flockkeepers, who will not need in general to purchase EID readers. My officials have worked extremely hard to deliver this legislation and supported its implementation. More than 1,100 sheep farmers attended EID training events in 13 markets across the North, this was in addition to information evenings delivered by staff from CAFRE, Veterinary Service and Animal Health and Welfare policy.

I can assure you that my department and I remain committed to reducing the level of red tape. As you are aware my Department has committed to a PSA Target to reduce the administrative burden on the agri-food sector by 25% by 2013 – with an interim target of 15% by 2011. We have and are continuing to take the issue seriously. Clear evidence of that, was the creation in early June, of a dedicated Better Regulation Advisory Unit. The unit is providing a strong advisory and co-ordination function across all departmental business areas to support the work towards delivering on the Better Regulation PSA Target. This Unit has worked closely with Business Areas in developing the Action Plan and will continue to work closely with them as they implement the Action Plan and monitor the progress against the target.

Cattle: Rare Breeds

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's position on assistance given to the protection of Irish rare breeds of cattle.

(AQO 553/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department supports and encourages all assistance given to the protection of Irish rare breeds of cattle.

My Department currently offers financial assistance for Irish Moiled cattle through Agri-environment Schemes.

There is no specific support for other breeds at present. However, subject to available funding, support for the use of specific breeds of livestock may be made available to Countryside Management Scheme agreement holders through the Special Environmental Project option. Proposals for funding as a Special Environmental Project must be consistent with the objectives of the Countryside Management Scheme, which include supporting biodiversity.

GM Crops

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the controversies surrounding the production of genetically modified crops.

(AQO 551/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am personally and politically opposed to the growing of GM crops on the island of Ireland.

I recognise that there are widely differing and strongly held views about the production of genetically modified (GM) crops.

Roles and responsibilities for the full range of issues raised by the genetic modification of food and animal feed are distributed across several local departments and agencies, including the Department of the Environment and the Food Standards Agency.

My Department's role in relation to genetic modification is solely in the enforcement of European law controlling the import of animal feed stuffs and seed certification.

Our local livestock industry, particularly our pig and poultry sectors, are dependent on imports of animal feedstuff, such as soya. Much of this comes from North and South America, where GM crops are widely grown.

The EU approvals and control procedures for GM crops have created problems for local farmers. Last year, a number of consignments of animal feed were denied entry to EU ports because they contained minute traces of GM varieties that were not approved in the EU. This was because at present the EU operates a “zero tolerance” policy towards the presence of unapproved GM varieties.

I have lobbied the EU Commission to bring forward a solution to this problem with low level presence of unauthorised GM organisms. I have highlighted how important a resolution to this issue is for the livestock industry here in the North, most recently with Commissioner Dalli last Friday morning. The EU Commission is progressing its proposals for a technical solution to the low level presence of unauthorised GM organisms. A vote is expected at the relevant EU standing committee in the coming months.

Farm Modernisation Programme

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applicants to date have applied for funding under the Farm Modernisation Programme Tranche 2.

(AQO 559/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The total number of applications received to Tranche 2 of the Farm Modernisation Programme by this morning was 2,856. This comprises of 2,560 on-line applications and 296 hard copy applications. The Programme remains open to receive applications until 4.00PM on Friday 26 November and therefore farmers still have a short time to apply and can choose to do so online, through the post or by hand delivery. Full details on how to apply are set out in the Tranche 2 Explanatory Booklet which can be downloaded from the internet or obtained in hard copy from the Managing Agent, Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership, and DARD offices.

Flooding

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what level of local knowledge will be applied by her Department, under the Floods Directive, when identifying areas most at risk.

(AQO 560/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD Rivers Agency is the competent authority for the implementation of the Floods Directive in the North and in order to complete the Preliminary Flood Risk Assessment has gathered a large amount of data from many local sources. Information available within the Agency has been collected with details from NI Water, Roads Service, NI Environment Agency and all relevant key infrastructure stakeholders. This information is currently being analysed to produce a draft list of significant risk areas which will be made public early in the next financial year. All interested parties and in particular those with local knowledge will have the opportunity to provide comments on the draft list once it is published. Any new information will all be carefully considered before a final list of areas at significant risk is produced.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Funding for Rifle or Shooting Clubs

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding was allocated through (i) capital grants; and (ii) revenue or project grants to rifle or shooting clubs in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1791/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. In the last five financial years, SNI has provided revenue or project grants totalling £270,501 to rifle or shooting clubs. This figure is broken down in the table below. During the same period, SNI has also provided one capital award of £3,200 to rifle or shooting clubs.

REVENUE FUNDING

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Totals
Exchequer				54,615	56,130	110,745
Lottery	37,900	16,000	46,000	59,749	107	159,756
Totals	37,900	16,000	46,000	114,364	56,237	270,501

Elite Facilities Programme in the North Down Area

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the Elite Facilities programme in the North Down area.

(AQW 1930/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Construction of a 50 metre swimming pool at Bangor; the first phase of the Major Sports Infrastructure Programme (formerly the Elite Facilities Programme); began in August 2010 and is currently scheduled for completion in June 2012.

The second phase of the Programme is at the final stage of the competition process, which requires the production of an outline business case and procurement strategy. The cases are currently being assessed by my Department to ensure that they meet the required value for money considerations and have achieved the standards required by the HMT Green Book for Economic Appraisals. When the approval process has been completed the Department will have to give careful consideration to the affordability of these projects within the current financial environment and competing demands.

The projects being assessed at stage 3, which include one project from the North Down constituency, are as follows:

Facility	Location	Applicant
Sailing	Ballyholme	Ballyholme Yacht Club
Velodrome	Newcastle	Down District Council
Basketball/Volleyball	Lisburn	Lisburn City Council
Tennis	Hillsborough	Wilmar Leisure Ltd
Indoor Athletics	Antrim	Antrim Borough Council

It is important that Northern Ireland has first class sporting facilities which everyone can enjoy and benefit from. We are moving in the right direction to achieve our aim however, there are some very difficult decisions and outcomes ahead, given that this is the most difficult spending reviews of recent times. Progressing any of the above projects, if they are successful through the process, will clearly depend on the outcome of the Budget 2010 Exercise.

Positive Social Prevention Schemes for Football Fans

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether his Department, in conjunction with the Department of Justice and other relevant bodies, has considered introducing positive social prevention schemes similar to the German, Belgian and Dutch 'fan coaching' initiatives, to provide a balance to the punitive measures against football fans which may have a negative impact on the economy through licensing restrictions.

(AQW 1950/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Irish Football Association (IFA) has already introduced a positive social prevention scheme for football fans in Northern Ireland similar to the German, Belgian and Dutch 'fan coaching' initiatives. It has never, therefore, been necessary for the Department of

Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) to consider, in conjunction with the Department of Justice (DOJ) and other relevant bodies, introducing a similar social prevention scheme for football in Northern Ireland.

However, the IFA, along with other football interests, has frequently called on Government to back the Association's existing social prevention scheme by introducing football offences legislation into Northern Ireland that would help the game overcome the negative economic impact that misbehaviour by a minority of spectators is having on the sport and the safety of fans. In response to these calls, DCAL is supporting efforts by the DOJ to introduce legislation into Northern Ireland that would help protect fans from the type of dangerous and irresponsible conduct that may arise partly as a result of alcohol misuse by a minority of individuals. I understand that the DOJ's proposed measures include powers to impose some restrictions on alcohol consumption at larger football grounds similar to those already in place in England and Wales. I also understand that the exercise of such powers in Northern Ireland would be subject to consultation and would take account of the interests of the public, the majority of fans and the economic impact on football as a whole.

Funding for Football Clubs

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the nature; and (ii) the amount of funding given to football clubs outside the Irish Premier League in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1954/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. In the last five financial years, SNI has allocated a total of £16,007,935 to organisations who provide support to football clubs at all levels including those outside the Irish Premier League. Within this, SNI has allocated a total of £3,448,569 directly to football clubs outside the Irish Premier League.

This funding and its purpose is broken down in the tables below.

2005/06

Club	Amount (£)	Purpose
25th Old Boys Football Club	1,580	Awards for All - Equipment
Antrim Rovers FC	1,840	Awards for All – Mini soccer league
Aquinas Football Club	5,000	Awards for All - Coaching
Ards District Youth Football Parent Committee	4,000	Awards for All - Coaching
Ballymacash Rangers FC	4,000	Awards for All - Development
Ballymena United Allstars Ladies FC	3,000	Awards for All - Equipment
Ballymoor Football Club	2,190	Awards for All - Coaching
Belfast Deaf United FC	5,000	Awards for All – Coaching
Belfast United Womens FC	4,900	Awards for All – Coaching
Belvoir Colts FC	4,210	Awards for All – Coaching
Carnlough FC	1,632	Awards for All – Tournament
Carryduff Colts FC	8,967	Awards for All - Coaching
Carryduff FC	620	Awards for All – Coaching
Castle Juniors FC	3,395	Awards for All – Coaching
Cregagh Rangers	2,730	Awards for All - Transport

Club	Amount (£)	Purpose
Dergview FC	2,908	Awards for All – Junior Football Team
Derriaghy Athletic FC	4,768	Awards for All – Coaching
Dromore Amateur FC	4,460	Awards for All – Feasibility Study
Enniskillen Rangers Youth FC	2,931	Awards for All – Equipment
Groarty Sky Blues	4,684	Awards for All – Coaching
Loughgall Youth FC	5,000	Awards for All – Youth Academy
Loughside FC	4,750	Awards for All – Youth Tournament
Lurgan Celtic FC	1,430	Awards for All – Equipment
Moneyslane FC	3,123	Awards for All – Equipment
Newhill FC	5,000	Awards for All – Cross Community Tournament
North Belfast United FC	4,248	Awards for All – Equipment
Oxford United FC	3,192	Awards for All – Equipment
Oxford/Sunnyside FC	3,400	Awards for All – Travel
Poleglass FC	5,000	Awards for All - Coaching
Rathfern Rangers FC	4,800	Awards for All - Coaching
Rathfriland Football Club Youth	2,870	Awards for All - Coaching
Riverdale FC	4,900	Awards for All - Coaching
St Mary's FC	2,850	Awards for All - Coaching
St Oliver Plunkett Boys FC	4,326	Awards for All - Coaching
St Patrick's FC	4,484	Awards for All – Summer School Programme
Tullycarnet Community Football Team	6,280	Awards for All - Equipment
Valley Colts Youth Football Club	900	Awards for All – Tournament
Valley Colts Youth Football Club	2,550	Awards for All - Coaching
Total	141,918	

2006/07

Club	Amount (£)	Purpose
Ards FC	458	Safety Management - Improvements
Armagh City FC	2,115	Safety Management - Improvements
Armagh City FC	1,250	Safety Management - Improvements
Total	3,823	

2007/08

Club	Amount (£)	Purpose
Bryansburn Rangers FC	8,149	Awards for All – Boundary Fence
Damolly Youth Football Club	2,690	Awards for All – Coaching
Dergview Juniors	3,986	Awards for All – Coaching
Grove United FC	5,190	Awards for All – Coaching
Hollywood Boys FC	3,850	Awards for All – Coaching
Tollymore United FC	4,098	Awards for All – Coaching
Total	27,963	

2008/09

Club	Amount (£)	Purpose
Ballyclare Comrades FC	10,000	Awards for All - Coaching
Carryduff Colts FC	3,915	Awards for All - Coaching
Carryduff FC	1,050	Awards for All - Coaching
Castle Juniors FC	6,000	Awards for All - Coaching
Cregagh Wanders Junior FC	4,491	Awards for All - Equipment
Crumlin Star FC	5,000	Awards for All - Coaching
Dergview FC	152,084	Places for Sport - Floodlighting
Moyola Park AFC	1,570,000	Building Sport – Construction of 3G Pitch & changing facilities
Newbuildings United FC	10,000	Awards for All - Coaching
Newhill FC	2,530	Awards for All - Equipment
Omagh United FC	9,400	Awards for All - Coaching
Rathfriland FC Youth	4,620	Awards for All - Coaching
Total	1,779,090	

2009/10

Club	Amount (£)	Purpose
Annagh United FC	84,872	Playing Facilities - Upgrade
Ballinamallard United FC	132,978	Places for Sport – Floodlighting
Ballinamallard United FC	87,050	Playing Facilities - Upgrade
Ballyclare Comrades FC	232,000	Playing Facilities - Upgrade
Ballymoney United FC	5,033	Awards for Sport - Equipment
Brantwood FC	1,776	Awards for Sport - Equipment
Crusaders Youth FC	9,021	Awards for Sport - Equipment

Club	Amount (£)	Purpose
Dungoyne Boys FC	7,375	Awards for Sport - Equipment
Greenisland FC	3,076	Awards for Sport - Equipment
Greenisland FC	985	Awards for Sport - Equipment
H&W Welders FC	75,488	Playing Facilities – Upgrade
Knockbreda FC	87,100	Playing Facilities – Upgrade
Laurelvale FC	1,073	Awards for Sport - Equipment
Lurgan Celtic FC	77,905	Playing Facilities – Upgrade
Moyola Park AFC	83,079	Playing Facilities – Upgrade
Portstewart FC	79,713	Playing Facilities – Upgrade
Sport & Leisure FC	87,050	Playing Facilities – Upgrade
Tollymore United FC	2,707	Awards for Sport – Equipment
Tullyvallen Rangers FC	192,494	Places for Sport – Construction of 3G pitch with Floodlighting
Warrenpoint Town FC	245,000	Building Sport – Construction of all weather playing field
Total	1,495,775	

Libraries in Upper Bann

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many people (i) visited; and (ii) joined each library in Upper Bann in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2011/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The table below shows the number of people who (i) visited and (ii) joined each of the libraries in the Upper Bann area in each of the last three years. The libraries I am listing as being in the Upper Bann area are; Banbridge, Brownlow, Gilford, Lurgan and Portadown.

	2009/10		2008/09		2007/08	
	Visitors	Joined	Visitors	Joined	Visitors	Joined
Banbridge	94,650	1,174	102,284	1,236	86,268	1,003
Brownlow	47,850	663	48,984	483	41,756	464
Gilford	9,800	117	13,312	98	12,792	78
Lurgan	33,350	1,793	77,168	1,525	81,484	1,425
Portadown	108,900	1,429	101,608	1,336	112,424	1,097

Libraries NI also provide a mobile library service and an outreach programme to housebound readers that would be available in the Upper Bann area.

Public Consultation on Museums Policy

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment he has made of the responses to the public consultation on museums policy.

(AQW 2014/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There were 25 responses received from the public consultation on museum's policy which ended on 30 September 2010.

My officials are currently assessing these responses. I will receive their briefing in due course.

Efficiency Savings

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to what extent he intends to prioritise efficiency savings over cuts in preparation for the next Budget.

(AQW 2031/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In delivering any savings required of my Department, I will, of course, look to increased efficiencies in the first instance and I have already asked officials to identify areas both within the Department and its arm's length bodies where these could be found. You may be aware that departments have already been delivering savings in administration costs of 5% year on year through the current CSR period.

However, I must also add that the scale of likely budget reductions means that increases in efficiencies will not be sufficient to cover them. Inevitably, there will be impacts on frontline services as well, though I will try to minimise these.

Cost of Civil Servants Attending the Commonwealth Games

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of departmental officials, civil servants and employees of arms-length bodies who attended the Commonwealth Games; (ii) the grade and job title of each individual and the reason for attendance; and (iii) the costs incurred (a) in total; and (b) by each individual.

(AQW 2043/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I would refer the Member to the information provided in the tables attached.

(I)

Departmental Officials/Civil Servants	Employees of ALB
3	0

(II)

Grade	Job Title	Reason for Attendance
	Special Advisor	To provide support to the Minister whilst attending the Games in support of the Northern Ireland Team and at the UK Sports Ministers meeting on 4/10/10.
PS	Personal Secretary	
Grade 7	Head of Sport	

(III)

Grade	Costs (£)
Special Advisor	4,751.24
PS	4,783.25
Grade 7	5,004.03
Total	14,538.52

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2066/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department paid the following amounts to BT in respect of the cost of calls and lines supplied in the last five financial years:

2005-06	£10,337
2005-07	£11,674
2005-08	£17,060
2005-09	£14,021
2005-10	£14,650

The companies listed below are currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications to the Department.

- Argyll
- British Telecom
- Cable & Wireless Communication
- Eircom UK Ltd
- Microcoms TRL
- O2 (UK) Ltd
- Orange
- Rainbow Telecom
- Sentel Independent Ltd
- Siemens
- Vodafone Ltd

The list refers to those suppliers the Department has paid for the provision of telecommunications in the current financial year.

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list all the companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for his Department.

(AQW 2067/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department paid the following amounts to BT in respect of the cost of calls and lines supplied in the last five financial years:

2005-06	£10,337
2005-07	£11,674
2005-08	£17,060
2005-09	£14,021
2005-10	£14,650

The companies listed below are currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications to the Department.

- Argyll
- British Telecom
- Cable & Wireless Communication
- Eircom UK Ltd
- Microcoms TRL
- O2 (UK) Ltd
- Orange
- Rainbow Telecom
- Sentel Independent Ltd
- Siemens
- Vodafone Ltd

The list refers to those suppliers the Department has paid for the provision of telecommunications in the current financial year.

Draft Irish Language Strategy

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether he intends to bring a draft Irish language strategy to the Executive before the end of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 2191/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Strategy will be presented to the Executive when I am content that all outstanding issues have been resolved.

Justice Bill: Sport

Mr B Armstrong asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with the Justice Minister, the Irish Football Association and the Amalgamation of Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs about the sport-related provisions of the Justice Bill.

(AQO 573/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have been in on-going correspondence with the Minister of Justice, David Ford MLA, regarding progress on the development of the sport-related provisions of the Justice Bill and its introduction in the Assembly. My officials are also in frequent contact with Department of Justice officials on these issues. Discussions with the Irish Football Association and the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs on the provisions are a matter for the Minister of Justice in the first instance.

However, I am aware that the IFA has been lobbying for some years for the introduction, into Northern Ireland, of the type of football offences legislation contained within the Justice Bill. I also recently received a letter from the Amalgamation stating that it broadly welcomes the proposals from the Department of Justice to introduce specific legislation on spectator controls to Northern Ireland. The Amalgamation also stated, in the same letter, that it believes that it is important that the legislation covering spectating at sports events in Northern Ireland is in line with the rest of the UK. In response, both I, and my officials, have informed the Minister and the Department of Justice of both organisations' declared support for legislation in this area.

Department of Education

Shared School Complex at Lisanelly

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of whether the plan for a shared school complex at Lisanelly could be used as a blueprint for other areas.

(AQW 1093/11)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): As I have previously indicated, I believe that the opportunity offered by the Lisanelly site is both exciting and unprecedented. This is the first time that any Education Minister has been able to offer a modern purpose built educational campus that is both cross-sectoral and cross-community. It is a high priority for me and my Department and I look forward to the delivery of a campus built on equality and excellence where future generations of children and young people learn the skills and confidence to succeed. I strongly urge Assembly colleagues to support me in my efforts to secure sufficient funds to successfully deliver this exemplar design.

Níl aon amhras orm go dtabharfaidh na ceachtanna a foghlaimíodh le linn fhorbairt an champais treoir d'fhorbairtí ceantarbhunaithe in áiteanna eile sa todhchaí, ach is é an treoirphrionsabal a bheas ann ná réitigh áitiúla le freastal ar riachtanais áitiúla.

I have no doubt that lessons learned during the development of the campus will inform future area-based developments elsewhere but the guiding principle will be local solutions to meet local needs.

Documents Translated from English into Irish

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Education to list the documents published by her Department in each of the last four years that have been translated from English into Irish.

(AQW 2082/11)

Minister of Education: Tá na caipéisí le haghaidh foilsithe a aistríodh ó Bhéarla go Gaeilge i ngach bliain le ceithre bliana anuas liostaithe thíos.

Listed below are documents which were translated from English to Irish in each of the last four years for publication.

2006/07
A Guide to Parents leaflet
Primary Supplementary Document
Form – Voluntary & Private Pre-school Education Centres 06/07
Advice to Parents Leaflet
Post Primary Forms
Report of the Evaluation of An tÁisaonad Lán-Ghaeilge/Irish-Medium Resource Unit, St Mary's University College
Education and Training Inspectorate – Inspection Reports for Irish Medium Schools
2007/08
Review of Irish Medium Education -Terms of Reference
Parents Leaflet
Guide for Parents Leaflet
Primary and Post Primary Forms
Education and Training Inspectorate – Inspection Reports for Irish Medium Schools

2008/09
Booklet – Supporting children with medical needs
Induction & Early Professional Development of Beginning teachers in Irish-Medium Schools
Consultation – Numeracy & Literacy
Map and Guide – Careers Education Information Advice
Leaflet – A Guide to Parents
Policy Document - Sustainable Schools
Review of Public Administration Screening Form & RPA Policy Paper
School Circulars 2008/13 and 2008/13A - School Development Planning
Consultation Response – Every School a Good School
Consultation Document – Special Education Needs & Inclusion Review
Report – Irish Medium Review
Policy Paper – Ownership & Representation of Controlled Schools
Consultation Document – Careers Strategy
Department of Education Business Plan 2008/09
Special Education Needs and Disability Order Consultation Documents
Consultation Document – Common Funding Formula 2008
School Circular 2008/19 – Grammar School Charges (amendments)
School Circular 2008/20 – Teachers' Pay & Allowances
Consultation Document – Irish Medium Education
School Circular 2008/23 – Specialist Schools Cohort 4
Special Education Needs Inclusion Review Booklet – Consultation Response
Review of Irish Medium Education Consultation Response – Children & Young Peoples version
School Circular 2008/27 – Pupil Records & Reporting Regulations
School Circular 2008/26 – JP McManus All Ireland Scholarships
Q & A Material – Transfer 2010 Guidance
Newcomer Policy
Policy Documents - Food in Schools
Equality Impact Assessment Document – Special Education Needs & Inclusion Review
Draft Consultation & Consultation Response Booklet – Teachers Compensation for Redundancy & Retirement Regulations
Overview of Responses – Every School a Good School Equality Impact Assessment result
Education and Training Inspectorate Leaflet – What is the work of the ETI?
Consultation Document – Special Education Needs & Inclusion review – 1st Children's Version
School Circular 2009/02 – Teachers' Registration Fees for the General Teaching Council

2008/09

Education and Training Inspectorate – Inspection Reports for Irish Medium Schools

2009/10

Equality Policy

Equality Impact Assessment Document – Transfer 2010

School Circular 2009/03 – Mark Enhancements

School Circular 2009/04 – eSchools Data Warehouse

Every School a Good School – Revised Results

School Circular 2009/08 – Delivering the Entitlement Framework

Consultation Document – Special Education Needs and Inclusion

School Circular 2009/10 – School Development Planning and Target Setting

School (Consultation) Circular – Taskforce on Traveller Education

School Circular 2009/13 – Teachers' Pay and Allowances

Consultation Document – Equality Screening – Exceptional Circumstances

School Circular 2009/07 – Transfer 2010

Consultation Document – Exceptional Circumstances, Equality and Human Rights

Booklet Foreword – Centinus Young Innovators

Research Brief – Special Education Needs of Bilingual Children

Pre-School Education Expansion Programme: Arrangements for September 2009 Admissions

Report – Together Towards Entitlement

Equality Impact Assessment Consultation – Teachers' Compensation for Redundancy & Premature Retirement

Final Transfer 2010 Guidance

Operational Circular 2009/07 – Duty to verify annexes for Nursery, Primary and Post Primary

Leaflet – Transfer 2010 Advice to Parents

Consultation Document and Covering Letter – Draft Education Regulations 2010

Leaflet and Poster – What Parents Need to Know 2010/11

Report of the responses to the Consultation on School Admissions (Exceptional Circumstances) Circular

Response to Consultation Respondents – The Schools Admissions (Exceptional Circumstances)

Common Funding Formula Consultation Documents

Draft Equality Impact Assessment on proposal to withdraw funding from Preparatory Departments of Grammar Schools

School Circular 2010/02 – General Teaching Council Fee

Consultation on changes to Teachers' Pensions (amendment) regulations (NI) 2010 – Final version of Equality Impact Assessment

2009/10
School Circular 2010/03 – Initial Teacher Education – Approval of Programmes
Consultation Document – Teacher Education Review
Results of Equality Impact Assessment and Analysis of responses to consultation on Every School a Good School – Strategy for raising achievement in Literacy & Numeracy
Irish Medium Literacy & Numeracy recommendations – complementary elements in strategy
Irish Medium Literacy & Numeracy Strategy – Terms of reference
School Circular 2010/01 – Guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education
Teacher Resource Information Sheet
Report – Teaching and Learning Research Programme
Department of Education Language Policy for Irish
Education and Training Inspectorate – Inspection Reports for Irish Medium Schools

Some of the documents listed above may include only a partial translation into Irish.

Early Years (0-6) Strategy Stakeholder Group

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the terms of reference for the Early Years (0-6) Strategy Stakeholder Group which will consider the consultation responses; (ii) whether this group will become the strategy implementation group; (iii) whether this group will replace the Regional Reference Group and the reasons why; and (iv) which stakeholders will be represented on this group and the process for selection.

(AQW 2135/11)

Minister of Education:

- (i). Mar fhreagairt ar cheisteanna a cuireadh faoin Straitéis, bunaíodh Grúpa Comhairleach na bPáirtithe Leasmhara le cuidiú a thabhairt don Roinn Oideachais anailís a dhéanamh ar thuairimí agus ar fhianaise a cuireadh i láthair tríd an chomhairliúchán ar an dréachtStraitéis um Luathbhlianta (0-6).
- (i). In response to concerns expressed about the Strategy, the Advisory Stakeholder Group has been established to assist the Department of Education in the analysis of views and evidence presented through the consultation on the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy. The purpose of the group is to assist DE in finalising the Strategy for consideration by the Minister of Education.

The role of the Group will be to contribute to the final Early Years (0-6) Strategy, within the overall objectives and framework of educational services, by providing views and advice on key issues emerging from the consultation.

Independent expertise and input will be sought from members. Members will be expected to bring to the exercise their views and expertise and contribute to the analysis of the responses and shaping the strategy, free from any sectoral focus or bias.

- (ii). The implementation of the Strategy will involve the collaboration of a range of partners and DE will consider the appropriate forum to ensure the engagement of partners when developing the implementation plan once the Strategy is finalised.
- (iii). In the early stages of the development of the Strategy DE established a Regional Reference Group (RRG) which in turn was supported by four thematic groups. Through these various groups, DE sought to gather the views and utilise the expertise of stakeholders to ensure a participatory approach to the development of the policy area. From 2007 onwards the input from the groups

was taken forward by DE in the development of the draft Strategy which has now issued for consultation.

There are currently no plans to continue the work of the RRG. Its work has been valuable but we are now at a different stage of the process.

(iv). The membership of the Group is drawn from:

- Department of Education
- The Early Years Organisation
- Children in NI
- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- Early Childhood Studies,
- Stranmillis University College
- Centre for Effective Services
- Education and Training Inspectorate
- The primary education sector
- The statutory nursery school sector

The Group discussed membership at its first meeting and agreed that further representation was required. Invitations to additional members will issue shortly and will include representation from Sure Start, the National Children's Bureau, MENCAP, Gingerbread. The Department has also invited membership from the Health and Social Care Board.

In addition, it was agreed that the Group would utilise additional expertise as and when appropriate.

Contract Specifications for Capital Builds

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education (i) who is responsible for producing and monitoring the contract specifications for capital builds for voluntary grammar schools; and (ii) to outline the respective roles of (a) the Boards of Governors; (b) the Department of Education; and (c) the Education and Library Boards.

(AQW 2145/11)

Minister of Education: San earnáil dheonach Ghramadaí, bíonn an bainisteoir tionscadail agus an fhoireann deartha atá fostaithe ag na Boird Gobharnoirí freagrach as na sonraíochtaí conartha le haghaidh tógálacha caipitil a chur i láthair agus faireacháin a dhéanamh orthu.

In the voluntary Grammar sector it is the responsibility of the Project Manager and the Design Team employed by the Boards of Governors to produce and monitor the contract specifications for capital builds.

The Boards of Governors are the sole contracting authority for their consultants and construction contractor. If the capital build is being funded by the Department of Education, then DE has an overall approval role in regard to the various design stages, approval to expenditure and payment of grant-aid.

There is no role for Education and Library Boards in the production or monitoring of contract specifications in Voluntary Grammar capital builds.

Admission to Grammar Schools

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of successful legal challenges for failure to gain admission to grammar schools in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2178/11)

Minister of Education: Níl taifead ag an Roinn Oideachais ná ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlann d'aon athbhreithnithe breithiúnacha nach n-ainmníonn DE nó ELB mar fhreagróir.

The Department of Education and the Education and Library Boards do not have a record of judicial reviews that do not name either DE or an ELB as a respondent.

Transport to Private Schools

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether her Department would consider funding transport to private schools for children with special educational needs.

(AQW 2214/11)

Minister of Education: Faoi Airteagail 10-12 de The Education (NI) Order 1996, tá sé faoi rogha na mBord cúnamh iompair a chur ar fáil do gach dalta a bhfuil ráiteas ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais aige / aici nuair atá moladh faoi chúnamh iompair sa ráiteas agus nuair nach scoil dheontaschúnta í an scoil atá ainmnithe sa ráiteas.

Under Articles 10-12 of The Education (NI) Order 1996, Boards have the discretion to provide transport assistance to pupils with statements of special educational needs where those statements make a recommendation relating to transport and where the school named in the statement is not a grant-aided school.

Strandtown Primary School

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons why her Department categorised Strandtown Primary School as 'partially compliant' with the Sustainable Schools policy, including the reasons why the school did not fully meet the criteria outlined in the policy.

(AQW 2277/11)

Minister of Education: Is é cúlra an athbhreithnithe caipitil ná an Beartas um Scoileanna Inbhuanaithe agus planáil atá bunaithe ar cheantar..

The backdrop for the capital review is the Sustainable Schools Policy and an area approach to planning. The major capital works project proposed for Strandtown Primary School, rather than the school, has been categorised as 'partially compliant'. The assessment of a major capital works projects, as partially compliant means that some issues have emerged, which relate either directly to the school, or wider area issues about sustainable provision.

In the case of Strandtown Primary School and its feeder infant schools, the model of provision for primary education predates the introduction of the revised curriculum. It is essential to ensure that future provision is planned in a way that meets the needs of children and the delivery of the curriculum without placing undue pressure on teachers and school leaders, ensuring also that there is appropriate accountability for the outcomes that pupils achieve at the end of each Key Stage. My officials are working closely with the Belfast Education and Library Board to resolve any issues in relation to capital schemes in the board area.

Sustainability of Junior Schools

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Education (i) whether the sustainability of junior schools is assessed using the same criteria that are used to assess the sustainability of other primary schools; and (ii) to detail any additional or exceptional criteria applied.

(AQW 2320/11)

Minister of Education: Baineann Polasaí um Scoileanna Inbhuanaithe de chuid na Roinne le gach scoil agus ba chóir tabhairt faoi deara go bhfuil sé chritéar ag an pholasaí a sholáthraíonn solúbthacht lena bheith ag amharc ar gach scoil agus na himthosca ar leith a bhaineann léi.

The Department's Sustainable Schools Policy applies to all schools and it should be noted that the policy has six criteria which provides the flexibility to look at each school in its own unique circumstances. The criteria are:-

- Quality Educational Experience
- Stable Enrolment Trends
- Sound Financial Position
- Strong Leadership and Management
- Accessibility
- Strong Links with the Community

Post-primary Admissions

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister of Education to outline her reasons for the recent changes to the operational advice and guidance on post-primary admissions.

(AQO 579/11)

Minister of Education: Academic selection is a failed system, socially and educationally. It creates and sustains injustice and inequality. It is fundamentally immoral. It has no place in a modern, progressive and enlightened society.

Oibreoidh Aistriú 2011 a bheag nó a mhór ar aon chaoi le hAistriú 2010, áfach, shocraigh mé ar athrú amháin a dhéanamh don phróiseas.

In many respects Transfer 2011 will operate in a similar way to Transfer 2010, however, I have decided to make one change to the process.

My Department's guidance on the Transfer 2011 process advises that primary school principals should conduct transfer interviews with parents during a period when these interviews cannot become involved in issues related to breakaway test results.

This is in response to concerns expressed by primary school principals and their representatives.

My Department's policy on post-primary transfer does not support the use of academic selection and breakaway tests which risk distorting the delivery of the revised curriculum within primary schools.

It is important that primary school principals focus their time and energy primarily on delivering the revised curriculum. I do see merit in primary school principals continuing to offer advice to P7 parents on the post-primary transfer process, but I question the need for transfer interviews to form such a resource intensive part of the process.

There is a considerable investment required to enable these interviews to take place, estimated to amount to some £0.5m, in the form of funding for teacher substitute cover. I have alerted schools to the fact that in the light of pressures on the education budget this funding may not be available next year.

I am also aware that many principals are unhappy about being placed in a difficult position by the actions of grammar schools operating breakaway tests. Primary school principals have no involvement in these tests and it is inappropriate, and indeed unfair, to expect them to provide advice on any aspect of these tests or associated procedures.

This change to the process is consistent with my Department's policy on post-primary transfer. I am determined to continue reforming our education system, ending academic selection and rejection of our children, and putting equality at the core of my Department's policies.

Schools: Governors

Mr B Leonard asked the Minister of Education to outline the roles and responsibilities of Boards of Governors in relation to educational standards within their schools.

(AQO 580/11)

Minister of Education: Bíonn ról iontach tábhachtach ag gobharnóirí le scoileanna a threorú agus a bhainistiú agus tréaslaím dóibh as an tiomantas agus as an tseirbhís a thugann siad do dhaoine óga.

Governors play a very important role in leading and managing our schools and I pay tribute to their dedication and service to our young people.

My school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, emphasises that school improvement is first and foremost the responsibility of the school and its Board of Governors.

I have spoken to school governors about their roles and responsibilities including the need to raise standards at conferences held over recent years at Castlereagh, Enniskillen and Templepatrick. I have also spoken to principals governors at a series of school improvement conferences held in Armagh, Belfast and Derry.

Boards of Governors are responsible for the overall management of the school and have a range of statutory duties that contribute to school improvement. Governors have to a duty to prepare a school development plan, which should set out the school's 3 year plan for improvement, and monitor progress against that plan.

Other important and relevant duties include those relating to child protection and pastoral care, the school's curriculum policy, provision for special educational needs and other support for pupils, the employment and welfare of staff, supporting and guiding the work of the principal, ensuring sound financial management, and monitoring the school's overall performance.

Members will also be aware that the Education Bill includes a specific duty on Boards of Governors to promote the raising of standards in their schools. I remain committed to progressing that legislation to create a system that more effectively meets the needs of our pupils.

Teacher Training

Mr B Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria used by her Department to assess future teacher manpower requirements before providing advice to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

(AQO 581/11)

Minister of Education: The Member will be aware that the teaching workforce in the north of Ireland comprises both male and female teachers and respectfully suggest that we should use a more inclusive term to reflect the workforce.

Socraítear líon na n-iontrálacha d'Oideachas Tosaigh Múinteoirí bunaithe ar cheithre thoisic.

The determination of Initial Teacher Education intakes is informed by four key factors:

- the overall forecast demand for teachers based on available information, including pupil numbers; teacher employment; teacher migration; and teacher vacancies;
- the forecast need for teachers in specific priority or shortage areas including, for example, in STEM-related disciplines, in relation to Special Education and Inclusion and in the Irish-medium sector;
- the need to maintain and develop the capacity for the local Initial Teacher Education providers to educate teachers in the future to meet the diverse needs of our pluralist school system; and
- the need to provide opportunities for young people with the right set of skills and talents and a genuine interest in pursuing an education qualification.

The overall process is informed by a range of statistical information provided by the Department's Statistics and Research Branch through the operation of a statistical model known as the Teacher Demand Statistical Model.

Education and Library Board: Councillors

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the delay in appointing councillors to the education and library boards.

(AQO 582/11)

Minister of Education: Bhí athbhunú na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlann riachtanach de bharr nár chomhlíon an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin a ghealltanas leis an Údarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna a bhunú ar an chéad lá de mhí Eanáir Dhá Mhíle is a Deich.

The reconstitution of the Education and Library Boards has been necessary because the Executive did not meet its commitment to establish the Education and Skills Authority on 1 January 2010. This has been very disappointing. I am ready to implement the new authority; it would save us some £20million a year. There is no valid reason to block this important reform.

In the meantime, I have had to put in place arrangements for the Boards to continue to operate for the transitional period. The selection processes followed are in line with guidance from the Commissioner for Public Appointments. They have proven to be protracted for a variety of reasons including some Councils initially not providing sufficient numbers of nominations; delays in the receipt of completed applications from some nominees; the withdrawal of a number of councillors who had been nominated by their Councils; and the fact that some nominees did not meet the eligibility criteria.

The appointment of Councillors to the North Eastern, Southern and Western Education and Library Boards is currently underway. The appointments are subject to the satisfactory completion of the requisite pre-appointment checks. I hope they can all be confirmed by next month. In the case of the Belfast Board it is disappointing that Belfast City Council has not yet provided at least two nominations per post on the Board in line with the principle of Ministerial choice on public appointments. It is the only Council not to do so. The appointment process has therefore not yet been concluded for that Board in spite of our best efforts to do so.

Integrated Schools

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Education how many controlled schools have transformed to become controlled integrated schools over the past three years.

(AQO 583/11)

Minister of Education: Le trí bliana anuas, chomhlíon trí scoil rialaithe na critéir a bhí riachtanach lena bheith i dteideal stádas imeasctha rialaithe a fháil.

In the last three years, three controlled schools have met the criteria necessary to become eligible for controlled integrated status. These are Cliftonville Integrated Primary School; Fort Hill Integrated Primary School; and Crumlin Controlled Integrated Primary School.

Two other schools, Ballymoney Model Primary and Parkhall College have been given conditional approval to transform to controlled integrated status. They are currently working towards satisfying the necessary criteria to achieve their objective.

School Leavers: Literacy and Numeracy

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education for her assessment as to whether the publication of a percentage figure for pupils who do not achieve a GCSE Grade A* to C in English and Maths is a fair reflection of the literacy and numeracy achievements of school leavers.

(AQO 584/11)

Minister of Education: Tarraingím aird arís is arís eile ar chéatadán, agus ar líon, na ndaoine óga nach mbaineann amach an tagarmharc de ghrád C nó níos fearr ag GCSE sa Mhatamaitic agus sa Ghaeilge nó sa Bhéarla le béim a leagan ar leibhéal uafásach na tearcghnóthachtála atá sa chóras – agus ar an ghéarghá atá ann le tabhairt faoi seo.

I have repeatedly drawn attention to the percentage, and the number, of young people who do not achieve the important benchmark of a grade C or better in GCSE Maths and Gaeilge or English to highlight the shocking level of underachievement we have in our system – and the urgent need to take action to address this.

It has long been widely accepted that, for the majority of young people, achievement of a grade C or better in GCSE Maths and Gaeilge or English is necessary to progress to further or higher education and to employment. Achievement at grades D-G indicates a level of competence in literacy and numeracy, but it would not be the ideal level to enable a young person to succeed in life and work.

It is particularly important that young people leave school having achieved a recognised level of functional competence in literacy and numeracy (and ICT). Revised GCSE specifications for English, English Language, Gaeilge and Mathematics, introduced for first teaching from September 2010, have embedded within them the requirements for Level 2 functionality in Communication and Application of Number. This means that achievement at grade C and above in these GCSEs is taken to signify attainment of the relevant functionality.

Nursery Places

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to ensure that there will be adequate nursery provision for the 2011/12 academic year.

(AQO 585/11)

Minister of Education: I am committed to ensuring that we offer an opportunity for a quality pre-school experience for children in the year before they commence compulsory education. The aim of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) is to provide one year of quality pre-school provision, in the year before compulsory education, for every child whose parents wish to avail of it. The Programme is delivered through a partnership approach, with provision available in the statutory nursery sector, (nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools) and funded pre-school places in the voluntary and private sector.

Responsibility for the implementation of the PSEEP at local level, rests with a Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) in each Education and Library Board (ELB).

Since 1998/99 the overall level of provision of pre-school places has risen from 45% to over 90%. Research tells us that around 10% of children in their final pre-school year do not avail of a funded place and this level is normally considered sufficient to meet demand.

Chomh luath is a bhí mé ar an eolas faoin easpa áiteanna i dtuaisceart na hÉireann ag deireadh mí Aibreáin sa scoilbhliain seo, chuir mé maoiniú sa bhreis ar fáil suas le £1.3 milliún le líon na n-áiteanna maoinithe réamhscoile a mhéadú agus le freastal a dhéanamh ar na páistí sin nach raibh áiteanna acu.

As soon as I became aware of the shortfall in places across the north of Ireland at the end of April for the 2010/2011 school year, I made available up to £1.3m of additional funding to increase the number of funded pre-school places in order to assist in meeting the demand from those children who had not been placed at the end of the applications process.

My Department is continuing to work closely with ELBs to ensure that, in the forthcoming school year, as many children as possible in their final pre-school year are placed in statutory nursery settings before the admission of any underage children. Children in their final pre-school year currently receive priority over younger children in the application process, however, if a statutory setting is undersubscribed, younger children are admitted at the same time as the older children.

In order to maximise uptake of places in the statutory sector by children in their final pre-school year, arrangements are being made for ELBs to operate a two-staged approach for applications in the 2011/12 school year. This will effectively delay the processing of applications from underage children by a few weeks to allow those children in their final pre-school year, who are unplaced after the first round of admissions, to access any available places before the applications from underage children are processed.

Education and Library Boards

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Education for an update on the reconstitution of the education and library boards.

(AQO 586/11)

Minister of Education: Is cúis mhór díomá í go raibh sé riachtanach na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlann a athbhunú de bharr nár chomhlíon an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin a ghealltanais le hÚdarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna a bhunú faoin chéad lá de mhí Eanáir Dhá Mhíle is a Deich.

It is very disappointing to note that reconstitution of the Education and Library Boards has only been necessary because the Executive did not meet its commitment to establish the Education and Skills Authority by 1 January 2010.

Transferor and Trustee Representatives and the General members were appointed to the Belfast, North Eastern, Southern and Western Education and Library Boards on 14 May 2010. The appointment of Councillors to the North Eastern, Southern and Western Education and Library Boards is underway. The appointments are subject to the satisfactory completion of the requisite pre-appointment checks. I hope they can all be confirmed by next month.

In the case of the Belfast Board it is disappointing that Belfast City Council has not yet provided at least two nominations for each Councillor post. The processes have not yet been concluded for that Board.

Education and Library Boards

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education for an update on the convergence of education and library boards' services and functions.

(AQO 587/11)

Minister of Education: Tá luathbhunú an Údaráis Um Oideachas agus Scileanna (ESA) riachtanach le planáil agus soláthar sheirbhísí a fheabhsú agus le coigiltí suntasacha a fhíorú.

The early establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) is vital both to improve the planning and delivery of services and realise significant savings. I remain ready to implement ESA, if the Executive will agree to do so. It is very disappointing that ESA is still not in place.

In the advance of ESA it has been necessary to take forward plans for the convergence of services. Plans are currently being considered by the Convergence Programme Management Board involving the Chairpersons of the five Boards. In the absence of a single authority, consensus must be achieved across the boards. The ESA Chair (Designate) and Chief Executive (Designate) continue to meet regularly with the boards and other stakeholders to progress matters.

Youth Service: Chief Inspector's Report

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the findings in the Chief Inspector's Report (2008-2010) in relation to the quality of provision in the youth sector.

(AQO 588/11)

Minister of Education: The Chief Inspector has reported that more than two-thirds of practice observed during area youth inspections was evaluated as good or better, and within the youth centres inspected, just over one-half of the quality of the provision for learning observed was evaluated as satisfactory or better, with just under one-quarter considered to be outstanding. I welcome the findings and I pay

tribute to the hard work and dedication of the youth workers and volunteers who provide these non formal education services for children and young people.

Cuirim fáilte roimh mhéadú i líon na ndaoine óga a ghlacann páirt ghníomhach, páirteachas a chuidigh go mór leo a gcuid féinmhuiníne agus a gcuid scileanna ceannaireachta a fhorbairt.

I also welcome the confirmation of increasing levels of active participation by young people which enabled them to develop self-confidence and leadership skills. The Chief Inspector has reported good examples of effective and creative project-based youth work which meets the needs of marginalised young people and outreach work in urban and rural areas.

While those who are achieving high standards are to be congratulated, there is still room for improvement. The report identified that almost one third of the quality of the provision in youth centres was deemed inadequate. I am therefore committed to delivering further improvements in the youth sector and maximising its contribution to educational achievement and to closing the gap between those achieving at the highest levels and those who, perhaps due to disadvantage, disability or other barriers to learning, are not achieving their full potential.

I welcome the recommendations contained within the Chief Inspector's Report relating to improvements in quality planning and the development of structures to monitor and evaluate the overall coherence and progression in the young peoples' learning experiences. Work is already underway to address issues of improving the process of self-evaluation. Further improvements will continue to be supported through the forthcoming Priorities for Youth Work in Education strategy which is currently under development.

Department for Employment and Learning

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions his Department has had with the Belfast Metropolitan College in relation to its financial proposals for the future of the college. **(AQW 1952/11)**

Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr D Kennedy): Due to ongoing concerns over the financial position of Belfast Metropolitan College, my Department commissioned an Efficiency Review to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of the College's operations which identified significant weaknesses in a number of key operational areas.

In response to the findings of that review, my Department requested that a college improvement plan be developed to address these weaknesses and to identify those actions required to return the College to long term financial stability. Accordingly, the College submitted a draft College Improvement Plan to my Department in May 2010 which was scrutinised by Departmental officials.

Whilst the College is responsible for identifying those actions which were required to achieve financial stability, the role of my Department is to review the Plan to ensure that all areas of weakness had been addressed, that the information provided was sufficient and comprehensive and that all underlying assumptions were reasonable.

As a result of the review, Departmental officials requested the College to provide some additional information and more detailed analysis to support and clarify its proposals. In the course of the next few months, officials from my Department held a series of meetings with senior college management to monitor progress on the finalisation of the Plan and ensure that it contained an appropriate level of detail.

The final Plan was submitted in September 2010 and, following final minor amendments, was agreed with the Department in October 2010. My Department is currently making arrangements to establish a steering group to monitor the implementation of the Plan.

Long-term Unemployed

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions his Department has had, or intends to have, with the UK Government in relation to its plans for the long-term unemployed.

(AQW 1953/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is in regular contact with the UK Government about its plans for the long-term unemployed. Officials are regularly updated by DWP officials on emerging thinking in Great Britain and their network of contacts allows for very close co-operation on at times a daily basis. UK Government Ministers have visited Northern Ireland to see how we have developed employment schemes locally. The Rt. Hon. Iain Duncan Smith MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, visited Northern Ireland on 2 September and, as a result of his visit, Chris Grayling MP, the Employment Minister, visited on 3 November.

We are well aware of the UK Government's plans in terms of a single work programme and pre- and post-entry provision, and we will learn more as the details are finalised. I have also had sight of the recent DWP White Paper "Universal Credit: welfare that works". Although this is essentially about a reform of the social security system and is therefore a matter for the Department for Social Development, it does have implications for my Department and its programmes and services. Again, I am examining that in detail. As a result of this intensive contact, I have been able to brief Executive colleagues on the Budget review Group on the implications from My Department's perspective of welfare reform for Northern Ireland.

Employment is, of course, a devolved matter but I will take the UK Government's plans into account when determining how we might address this issue in Northern Ireland. You will appreciate that my ability to introduce additional measures will be influenced by the resources made available through the 2010 Budget process.

Coleraine Campus of the University of Ulster

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he intends to ensure that the Coleraine Campus of the University of Ulster (i) continues to be a centre of academic excellence; and (ii) delivers as a centre for research to work with local industry and enterprise.

(AQW 1975/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) In 2005, as part of the Higher Education Teaching and Learning Strategy my Department committed funding of £6 million for a five year initiative to facilitate the establishment and operation of Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) at our four Higher Education Institutions, including one at the University of Ulster in Coleraine. My Department is currently working with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to evaluate the impact and sustainability of this initiative.
- (ii) Since 2002 my Department has provided grant of almost £15m, through a variety of funding streams, to a number of dedicated research centres at the University of Ulster's Coleraine Campus, all of which have now become self-sustaining. This financial support has been specifically targeted at research which focuses upon coastal systems, bio-imaging, metabolomics, molecular biosciences and the media.

The assistance provided has enabled world-class research within these disciplines to be carried out at Coleraine which interacts with, and impacts upon, a range of government bodies, business and the wider community.

The prestigious nature of much of this research was recognised in the UK-wide Research Assessment Exercise 2008, which highly rated the research being carried out by the university within the areas of biomedical sciences and media studies. These exceptional assessments of research quality have subsequently been reflected by my Department in its allocation of Quality-related Research funding which is paid to support the university's research infrastructure.

Efficiency Savings

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to what extent he intends to prioritise efficiency savings over cuts in preparation for the next Budget.

(AQW 2017/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: As part of the Budget 2010 process I intend to prioritise efficiency savings over cuts to the fullest extent possible. However, given the potential scale of reductions that may be required from my Department I may, unfortunately, require both.

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2047/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Please find below details of the total costs of calls and lines supplied by BT and paid by the Department for Employment and Learning.

Year*	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Costs	£31,771	£ 30,997	£ 35,667	£ 39,355	£ 46,554

* Information provided in financial years

DIAL Network is an internal telephone network for the NICS currently operated by DFP. Below are costs incurred by the Department for Employment and Learning for this service. Whilst BT is one of the primary suppliers of this service, a number of other suppliers are also included in the costs below.

Year*	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Costs	£284,057	£265,031	£232,270	£ 236,028	£275,961

* Information provided in financial years

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list all companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for his Department.

(AQW 2048/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The companies which are currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications to the Department for Employment and Learning are Vodafone; Orange; British Telecom; Eircom; Virgin Media; C&W; C&W Energis; Global Crossing; OPAL and O2.

Community-based Education and Training Provision

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if and how community-based education and training provision will be included in his spending plans.

(AQW 2052/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Training for Success and ApprenticeshipNI programmes are delivered under contracted arrangements with a range of training providers including community - based organisations. The current contracts for delivery will expire in March 2011. Consequently, subject to DFP approval to the Business Case, the Department in conjunction with Central Procurement Division is about to launch a tender process for the procurement of training delivery over the next 3 years.

As the main providers of community education throughout Northern Ireland, Colleges will continue to encourage access to Further Education (FE) by delivering a wide and varied curriculum through

their main campuses and network of community outreach centres. Colleges remain keen, subject to demand, to meet the learning needs of adults in local communities.

All community education provision, delivered by the six Further Education Colleges, will continue to be funded by the Department through the annual block grant.

Under Priority 1 of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2007-2013, approximately £275 million* (based on the current EU Commission exchange rate value for November 2010, including 40% ESF, 25% Departmental funding and 35% match funding from other government Departments and public organizations) will be made available for projects delivering education and training based activities. The majority of these projects are from the voluntary and community sectors.

Community-based Learning Opportunities

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the extent to which community-based learning opportunities, provided by the community sector, address inequality and increase social inclusion in areas of multiple deprivation in Belfast.

(AQW 2055/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department is committed to developing a highly skilled and innovative workforce that will contribute to social inclusion and economic success. The quality and effectiveness of training for young people and adults are crucial elements of that process and is provided by Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes. These are delivered by a number of contracted training providers including community based organisations.

There are 14 Training Suppliers in the greater Belfast area, 7 of which are community based organisations

The Department, subject to DFP approval to the Business Case, is due to re-contract for this training provision. In considering tenders, the emphasis will again be on an organisation's ability to deliver quality training to a diverse range of participants and an equality of service throughout Northern Ireland. This will continue to be monitored on an ongoing basis.

The Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2007-13 supports activities which are focused on assisting unemployed and economically inactive people to enter, remain, and make progress in sustained employment. This helps to address social exclusion experienced by disadvantaged groups throughout Northern Ireland. The majority of projects supported under Priority 1 of the Programme are community – based and provide a range of activities to help participants access training, education and employment opportunities.

The Northern Ireland ESF Programme is a regional programme and as such there are no specific geographical areas targeted. The programme is intended to address issues of social inclusion and disadvantage among individuals on a regional basis. A greater proportion of the current ESF projects are based in Belfast (50 in total), some have a headquarter address in Belfast but deliver training across other areas of Northern Ireland. Additionally there are some individuals undertaking training in Belfast who are drawn from a wider geographical area.

Belfast Metropolitan College: Springvale Campus

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether Belfast Metropolitan College's Springvale Campus is located in Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter.

(AQW 2062/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Belfast Metropolitan College's Springvale Campus is located in Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter.

DEL: Comprehensive Spending Review 2010

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the likely impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review on his Department's budget.

(AQO 593/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Finance Minister has already indicated that the outcome of the UK Comprehensive Spending Review for Northern Ireland means a real reduction in current expenditure and particularly in capital expenditure over the four year Budget period. In that context the Northern Ireland Executive (and ultimately the Assembly) has some very difficult decisions to make and I am not in a position to comment on my Department's allocations until those discussions have been finalised and the Executive has set out its position. It will be important to ensure that there is sufficient investment in place to promote skills development and employability. I look forward to your support and the support of your party for my Department in these negotiations.

Further Education: Redundancies

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many redundancies are being proposed in the Further Education sector.

(AQO 594/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Apart from Belfast Metropolitan College, my Department has not been notified of any other redundancies in the Further Education sector. In the case of the Belfast Metropolitan College, the College's Improvement Plan has identified a need for 168 potential redundancies.

This Improvement Plan has been developed to return the College to sound financial health. All public bodies need to live within their budgets and I know this House, especially through the Public Accounts Committee, supports the need for robust financial management procedures in colleges.

That said, irrespective of the circumstances that have led to this situation, I have every sympathy for those staff who are likely to be affected and trust that discussions between management and the trade unions will focus on limiting the number of compulsory redundancies.

Looking to the future, colleges remain aware of the need to plan for a number of scenarios arising from the Comprehensive Spending Review, including the possibility of reduced funding. As staff salaries form a significant element of colleges' expenditure, some further reductions in staffing complements may be unavoidable. The scale of these reductions will depend on the budget allocated to my Department by the Executive and this Assembly.

Universities: Dropout Rates

Mr K McCarthy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to reduce university drop-out rates.

(AQO 595/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is working with the Northern Ireland Universities and University Colleges to reduce drop out rates, in particular among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I know that both universities regard the improvement of drop out rates as an institutional priority.

In academic year 2010/11 my Department has allocated funding of £1.5m to the Northern Ireland higher education institutions in recognition of the additional cost involved in implementing measures to improve retention of these students.

In addition, my Department is leading on the development of a Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education. The issue of drop-out rates among disadvantaged students will be specifically addressed in the development of this strategy.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr S Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the reasons why Belfast Metropolitan College is in a position of serious financial deficit.

(AQO 596/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Due to concerns which it had over the financial health of Belfast Metropolitan College, my Department commissioned an Efficiency Review of the college in 2008. The Review identified significant weaknesses in a number of areas, particularly in relation to financial planning, management and control. In response the College developed an Improvement Plan to address these weaknesses and return it to long term financial stability. This Plan has now been agreed with the Department and is being implemented by the College.

Belfast Metropolitan College: Redundancies

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide an update on the recent announcement of proposed redundancies at Belfast Metropolitan College.

(AQO 599/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Apart from Belfast Metropolitan College, my Department has not been notified of any other redundancies in the Further Education sector. In the case of the Belfast Metropolitan College, the College's Improvement Plan has identified a need for 168 potential redundancies.

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Queen's University Belfast: Car Parking

Mr G McHugh asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether visitors and students are being provided with adequate access to car parking facilities at Queen's University and other third level educational institutions.

(AQO 601/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Car parking facilities in and around Queen's University and other third level educational institutions are the responsibility of the respective institution and the Department for Regional Development. You will wish, therefore, to liaise with them in respect of this matter.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any work undertaken by Invest NI to encourage local small and medium sized enterprises to take advantage of commercial opportunities in the fast growing Asian economies, particularly China.

(AQW 1882/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): Invest NI has a successful record in encouraging Northern Ireland companies to investigate and develop opportunities that exist in China, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, South Korea and Taiwan, primarily through trade missions and Doing Business Seminars. Over the past six years, Invest NI has taken 295 companies to China which is the largest participation of companies from any UK region, and 341 companies to other Asian countries mentioned above.

In-market support services are provided by Invest NI's offices in Shanghai and Mumbai which were opened in recognition of the importance of these emerging markets. Northern Ireland SMEs also have access to high-quality market information through Invest NI's Business Information Centre and can learn new business skills by participating in sector specific training workshops.

A trade mission took place to Mumbai and Calcutta in early November and a further mission is planned for Shanghai and Hong Kong at the end of November, which I will lead.

Efficiency Savings

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to what extent she intends to prioritise efficiency savings over cuts in preparation for the next Budget.

(AQW 2015/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI was set a target for cumulative efficiencies of £45.4m in Budget 2008-11, and has delivered cumulative efficiencies of £48.2m to date.

As part of Budget 2011-15, DETI will again seek savings through continuous efficiency improvements and will prioritise these over cuts. However, given the level of savings already delivered and the extent of the anticipated reductions, it is likely that the majority of reductions would represent cuts to budgets.

Public Open Space Land

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much public open space land is owned by her Department and its associated bodies.

(AQW 2022/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its associated bodies own approximately 22 acres of open space land.

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to her Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2051/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment has paid the following amounts to BT for calls and lines in financial years 2005-06 to 2009-10.

2005-06	£243,789.13
2006-07	£201,567.22
2007-08	£283,320.19
2008-09	£149,281.83
2009-10	£156,772.80

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list all companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for her Department.

(AQW 2100/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The following companies are currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications to Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment:

- BT
- Vodafone
- Orange
- Eircom
- SatCom

Provision of Telecommunications

Mr G McHugh asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to address the deficit in the provision of telecommunications throughout the island of Ireland, which is affecting the development and progression of trade and industry.

(AQW 2269/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department is responsible for telecommunications matters in Northern Ireland. Our core telecommunications infrastructure is excellent. We have made unprecedented investment under the Programme for Government to bring next generation broadband services to 85% of businesses and will complete the £48 million fibre to the cabinet upgrade by May 2011. We also engage with counterparts in the Department for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland to deliver projects of mutual benefit such as the €30 million Project Kelvin.

Boccia World Cup

Mr P Girvan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what level of funding will be allocated to the Boccia World Cup due to take place in August 2011.

(AQO 572/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NITB Events Unit is preparing to open a call for funding early December 2010 for the financial year 2011/2012. There will be two funding programmes available, a National Funding Programme and an International Funding Programme, at which stage any application in relation to the Boccia World Cup will be considered.

Department of the Environment

Local Council Annual Wage Bill

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the annual wage bill of each local council in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1993/11)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): The information requested for the last three financial years is set out in the table below.

COUNCIL ANNUAL WAGES BILL

Council	2007/2008 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £
Antrim	8,575,311	8,230,902	8,117,131
Ards	10,028,653	9,966,399	10,562,378
Armagh	8,271,762	8,646,488	10,246,263
Ballymena	8,267,200	8,843,839	8,996,428
Ballymoney	3,637,894	4,084,327	4,488,074
Banbridge	4,905,261	5,610,932	6,120,813
Belfast	74,354,114	79,322,048	81,672,150
Carrickfergus	5,035,859	5,087,853	5,648,569
Castlereagh	9,907,410	9,281,794	9,105,815
Coleraine	10,095,350	10,231,700	10,683,363
Cookstown	5,468,693	5,871,976	6,545,428
Craigavon	13,797,906	15,056,759	15,649,126
Derry	16,371,428	17,939,806	18,872,293
Down	8,693,045	9,130,689	9,926,159
Dungannon & S Tyrone	7,287,590	7,626,618	7,415,942
Fermanagh	7,104,702	7,622,583	8,161,659
Larne	4,922,476	5,372,416	5,576,481
Limavady	4,381,932	5,023,326	4,895,203
Lisburn	12,982,005	13,471,165	14,183,772
Magherafelt	4,499,319	5,082,634	5,754,961
Moyle	3,476,252	3,291,957	4,010,958
Newry & Mourne	12,080,759	13,332,484	13,476,818
Newtownabbey	10,699,579	11,740,165	12,301,083
North Down	9,889,218	10,550,781	11,188,546
Omagh	7,476,496	7,676,365	7,732,554
Strabane	5,158,892	5,464,974	5,763,928
Total	277,369,106	293,560,980	307,095,895

Illegal Storage of Tyres

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what action he is taking to address the illegal storage of tyres; and (ii) how many people have been prosecuted for the illegal storage of tyres in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2032/11)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) The Northern Ireland Environment Agency routinely inspects and monitors all licensed and exempt waste sites, particularly those which involve the storage, baling, shredding and/or crumbing of waste tyres. Agency staff record breaches of licence conditions and issue warning letters, Suspension Notices or Revocation Notices in accordance with the NIEA Enforcement and Prosecution Policy to have all non-compliances expeditiously remedied.

The Agency also investigates all intelligence it receives on serious and persistent offending, including the illegal storage of waste tyres. Full investigations will be carried out on the most serious cases and where appropriate case files are submitted to the Public Prosecution Service, which considers prosecution. Its decisions are based on the evidence presented by NIEA and consideration of public interest and sufficiency of evidence.

The Planning Service can also take enforcement by issuing Enforcement and/or Stop Notices to seek the cessation of the importation of waste tyres onto sites which do not have planning permission and the removal of all tyres stored illegally.

- (ii) NIEA through PPS took one prosecution in 2007 and the offender was fined £400. NIEA has also initiated criminal proceedings against one operator regarding the illegal storage of tyres. The Agency has submitted the case to the PPS and it is currently assessing the file. There have been other prosecutions however these related to the deposit or burning of waste tyres, rather than their storage.

High Hedges Legislation

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the revised High Hedges legislation.

(AQW 2076/11)

Minister of the Environment: The High Hedges Bill is currently at Committee Stage which has been extended until 17 December 2010.

The aim is to have the Bill through the Assembly by March 2011.

Derelict or Vacant Properties and Building Sites

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment what legislation exists to cover the responsibilities of owners of (i) derelict or vacant properties; and (ii) derelict or vacant building sites; and what enforcement action can be taken by his Department to ensure these sites are properly maintained.

(AQW 2089/11)

Minister of the Environment: My Department does not have any powers to take enforcement action to ensure that derelict or vacant buildings or building sites are properly maintained. A number of other Government Departments and statutory bodies do, however, have such powers.

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.

The Housing Executive has general statutory powers which enable it to make Closing or Demolition Orders for houses that are considered to be unfit for human habitation. These powers are contained in Chapter II of Part III of the 1981 Housing (NI) Order (as substituted by Schedule 5 of the Housing (NI) Order 1992).

Under Chapter V of the 1981 Order, the Housing Executive has the power to take possession of unoccupied premises where that house is suitable to be used for housing purposes (Article 60) and the power to secure or demolish unoccupied premises in order to either prevent damage or to protect housing accommodation and to recover costs from the owner where appropriate (Article 63)

Conor Murphy, MP, MLA, the Minister for Regional Development, has also 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. During routine maintenance inspections, Roads Service may identify buildings or properties that could endanger or obstruct road users. In some cases, Roads Service may also try to identify the owners/occupiers of the building, to 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 a notice on the owner/occupier. This would require him to carry out such works so as to remove the hazard, if in Roads Service's opinion it considers 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.

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to list all companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for his Department.

(AQW 2098/11)

Minister of the Environment: Companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications to my Department are listed below.

- Atlas Communications
- British Telecom
- Cable & Wireless
- Eircom
- O2
- Orange
- Vodafone

Chargeable Services

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to list the chargeable services provided by his Department which (i) can; or (ii) cannot be paid for on-line.

(AQW 2111/11)

Minister of the Environment: The table below lists the chargeable services provided by my Department and whether or not they can be paid for on-line.

Service Provided	Payment On-line
Planning Service – Planning Applications.	No
Planning Service – Property Certificates.	No
Driver and Vehicle Agency –Vehicle Tests.	Yes
Driver and Vehicle Agency – Driving Tests.	Yes
Driver and Vehicle Agency – Theory and other Tests.	Yes
Driver and Vehicle Agency – Road Transport Licensing.	Yes
Driver and Vehicle Agency – Vehicle Licensing.	No

Service Provided	Payment On-line
Driver and Vehicle Agency – Driver Licensing.	Yes
Driver and Vehicle Agency – Digital Tachograph Card.	Yes
NI Environment Agency – Pollution Prevention and Control Applications.	No
NI Environment Agency – Waste Management Licences.	No
NI Environment Agency – Registration of Waste Carrier and Brokers.	No
NI Environment Agency – Industrial Water Discharge Consent Applications.	No
NI Environment Agency – Wildlife Licences	No
NI Environment Agency – Hazardous Waste Consignment Note Applications	No
NI Environment Agency – Domestic Water Discharge Consent Applications	No
NI Environment Agency – Nitrate Derogation Registrations.	No
NI Environment Agency – Marine Disposal Licence Applications	No
NI Environment Agency – Producer Responsibility (Packaging Waste) Applications	No
NI Environment Agency – Abstraction and Impoundment Licence Applications	No
NI Environment Agency – Control of Major Accident Hazard Applications	No

It is anticipated that on-line facilities will be available for all Planning Service applications and property certificates and the vast majority of Northern Ireland Environment Agency services in early 2011.

Planning Service Staff Redeployment

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the process of consultation carried out with Planning Service staff in relation to staff redeployment.

(AQW 2121/11)

Minister of the Environment: The Department has done and continues to do, everything possible to consult with and keep Planning Service staff informed of progress in relation to redeployment.

The process of consultation about the financial pressures facing the Department and their implications for staff commenced before the start of the 2010-11 financial year and is an ongoing process. Consultation and communication has on several occasions involved direct correspondence from the Permanent Secretary to all staff, a series of face to face briefing sessions in the main Planning Service offices to which all Planning Service staff were invited, a comprehensive set of over 160 related Frequently Asked Questions and answers published on the Agency's intranet (FAQs), articles published in the Department's monthly Team Brief and providing speedy responses to over 130 queries posted by Planning Service staff on its electronic Bulletin Board.

In addition the Department has written directly to individual groups of staff affected or all staff as applicable.

At all times the TUS has been kept informed and consulted throughout the redeployment process.

Pollution in the Mallusk and Ballymartin Rivers

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of any incidents and the current levels of pollution, in the Mallusk and Ballymartin rivers in the last year; and (ii) whether the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has passed on any relevant evidence in the hope of securing prosecutions.

(AQW 2209/11)

Minister of the Environment: During the year 2010 to date, a total of 20 water pollution incidents were substantiated by officials from Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in the Blackwater (Mallusk) and Ballymartin River catchments, of which 16 incidents were of low severity and 4 were of medium severity.

From the 4 medium severity incidents, enforcement action, in line with NIEA Enforcement Policy has resulted in 1 prosecution file being forwarded to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). In 2 cases, evidence has been gathered with a view to prosecution though a file has not yet been forwarded to the PPS. The remaining case was very recent and a decision has not yet been taken on the appropriate enforcement action.

With regard to water quality in these rivers, NIEA's monitoring of the Mallusk (Blackwater) River indicates that it is of "bad" quality as defined in the Water Framework Directive.

Under the same monitoring programme, the Ballymartin River is monitored at three separate points. At two of these monitoring points the Ballymartin River is of "good" status under the Water Framework Directive, and at one point is of "moderate" status indicating some pollution pressure.

I recognise that water quality in the Mallusk area has historically been poor. This is due to several causes, in particular that the rivers in this area flow through a large industrial estate and a heavily populated area, and are therefore vulnerable to the polluting pressures common to many urban streams.

To address and rectify these problems NIEA has in recent years increased its proactive pollution prevention work in the wider Mallusk area. This has included, for example, tracing all drainage within the Mallusk area, visiting every single industrial premises in the catchment, inspecting each site for potential pollutants and pollution risks on site, and working with site operators to rectify all of the identified pollution issues.

Another important milestone in addressing water quality issues in this area has been the recent establishment of the Sixmilewater River Trust. This Trust was formed to work with stakeholders living and working throughout the Sixmilewater catchment to increase awareness of and to improve water quality along the length of the river.

I am confident that all of this ongoing work with industry and with local stakeholders will inevitably lead to improvements in water quality throughout the catchment.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to acknowledge your practical assistance in the work to improve water quality throughout the Sixmilewater River, including the Blackwater and Ballymartin Rivers. I am aware that you sit on the Board of the Sixmilewater River Trust, and that officials from my Department regularly meet with you and value your practical input.

Goods Vehicle Operator Licensing Scheme

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment whether the current Goods Vehicle Operator Licensing scheme in England, Wales and Scotland is self-financing; and whether the Goods Vehicle Operator Licensing Scheme to be introduced here will be self-financing.

(AQW 2261/11)

Minister of the Environment: Information from the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA) in GB is that the Operator licensing scheme aims to be self financing.

The Department intends that the scheme to be introduced in Northern Ireland is developed with the same aim.

Work is ongoing on the development of a funding model that will be in line with that principle.

Planning Applications

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of the Environment to what extent the Planning Service may deviate from the requirements of an area plan when determining the suitability of a planning application.
(AQW 2386/11)

Minister of the Environment: Article 25 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 states that where an application is made for planning permission, the Department, in dealing with the application, shall have regard to the development plan, so far as material to the application, and to any other material considerations.

Paragraph 59 of Planning Policy Statement 1 'General Principles' advises that the guiding principle in determining planning applications is that development should be permitted, having regard to the development plan and all other material considerations, unless the proposed development will cause demonstrable harm to interests of acknowledged importance.

PPS 1 provides advice on the role of development plans, including draft development plans, and other material considerations such as PPSs in assessing development proposals. Where it is decided that a consideration is material to the determination of a planning application the courts have held that the assessment of weight is a matter for planning judgement by the planning authority. Thus it is for the Department to assess the weight to be attached to each material consideration, including the development plan.

This means that some decisions by the Department will not follow published policy or guidance. In other words, the Department may occasionally depart from published policy, including that contained in a development plan, when it considers that it is outweighed by other factors and can be justified in the circumstances of the particular case and the Department must exercise its judgement in determining the application.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Staff Salaries

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 667/11, to detail the arms-length bodies which currently have staff earning (i) between £50,000 and £100,000; and (ii) over £100,000.

(AQW 1718/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The numbers of staff employed in each arms length body that are paid (i) between £50,000 and £100,000; and (ii) over £100,000 per year are detailed in the table below.

Arms Length Body	Staff paid between £50,000 and £100,000 per year	Staff paid over £100,000 per year
Agri-Food Biosciences Institute	43	0
Livestock Meat Commission	3	0
NI Fisheries Harbour Authority	1	0
Armagh Observatory & Planetarium	2	0
Arts Council NI	1	0
Library Authority NI	11	0
National Museums NI	6	1
NI Museums Council	0	0

Arms Length Body	Staff paid between £50,000 and £100,000 per year	Staff paid over £100,000 per year
Northern Ireland Screen	1	0
Sport NI	4	0
Belfast Education & Library Board	44	0
Western Education & Library Board	39	1
North Eastern Education & Library Board	34	0
South Eastern Education & Library Board	47	0
Southern Education & Library Board	40	0
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	6	0
Youth Council for Northern Ireland	2	0
Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education	1	0
Staff Commission for Education & Library Boards	1	0
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment	33	0
Industrial Tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunal	0	9
Ulster Supported Employment Limited	1	0
CITB – ConstructionSkills NI	1	0
Labour Relations Agency	3	0
NI Tourist Board	2	0
Invest NI	34	1
HSENI	9	0
Consumer Council	1	0
Belfast HSC Trust	798	396
Northern HSC Trust	356	127
South Eastern HSC Trust	337	126
Southern HSC Trust	287	115
Western HSC Trust	479	131
NI Ambulance Service	8	0
Patient & Client Council	1	0
Business Services Organisation	37	1

Arms Length Body	Staff paid between £50,000 and £100,000 per year	Staff paid over £100,000 per year
Public Health Agency	24	11
HSC Board	74	5
NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency	5	0
NI Social Care Council	4	0
NI Fire and Rescue Service	60	1
NI Medical and Dental Training Agency	4	2
NI Practice & Education Council for Nursing & Midwifery	6	0
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority	7	1
Local Government Staff Commission	1	0
Northern Ireland Local Government Officer's Superannuation Committee	2	0
Police Service of Northern Ireland	177	6
(DOJ) Others*	40	3
Ilex URC	5	1
The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland	1	0
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	23	2
Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland	3	0
Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland Limited	3	0
Strategic Investment Board	12	6
Planning Appeals Commission and Water Appeals Commission	10	0
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland	4	0
Community Relations Council	1	0
Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission	1	0
Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland	4	0

* DOJ was established on 12 April 2010. DOJ Others includes: Youth Justice Agency, Forensic Science NI, Compensation Agency, NI Policing Board, Probation Board NI, Office of the Police Ombudsman NI, Criminal Justice Inspectorate NI, NI Law Commission, Office of the Prisoner Ombudsman, Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust.

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list all the companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for his Department.

(AQW 2068/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The main providers of telecommunications services to both DFP and NICS are BT and eircom. The full list of providers is as follows:

- BT
- C&W
- C&W Energis
- Eircom
- Global crossing
- O2
- Opal
- Orange
- Virgin Media
- Vodafone

Pay Restraint for NIO Staff

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what representations his Department has made to the Northern Ireland Office on the issue of pay restraint for NIO staff.

(AQW 2072/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel has made no representations to the Northern Ireland Office on the issue of pay restraint. The NIO is a separate employer and seeks its pay remit directly from Her Majesty's Treasury.

Changes to Corporation Tax

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the potential timescale for the introduction of any changes to corporation tax.

(AQW 2113/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: As you will be aware, the Coalition Government committed to publishing a paper on rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy in the Autumn which would include an examination of possible mechanisms for changing the corporation tax rate. HM Treasury have indicated that there has been some slippage in that timetable due to Spending Review pressures. It is now hoped that the paper can be published in December and the consultation on this completed in time for a Government response as part of Budget 2011.

We understand that the paper will include an assessment of the potential costs and benefits of reducing the rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland. And while HM Treasury officials have indicated that detailed data on costs is not yet available, it is clear that these are likely to be significant. Therefore we will need to carefully consider this analysis before we can come to any conclusion on whether reducing the corporation tax rate would be in the best interests of Northern Ireland, and how this might be implemented.

In terms of timescale, it is important to recognise that should the Executive decide to seek the power to reduce corporation tax in Northern Ireland, this would require significant legislative changes and EU agreement. Therefore it is likely that any change in the corporation tax rate would take a number of years to implement should the Executive decide to take this course of action.

Civil Service: Staff

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 1875/11, for a breakdown of the number of staff at Grade 5 and above in each Department.

(AQW 2118/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is set out in the attached tables.

NICS PERMANENT STAFF AT GRADE 5 & ABOVE LEVEL - 1 APRIL 2006

	Head of NICS	Permanent Secretary Level	Grade 3	Grades 4 & 5	Total
DARD	0	1	4	15	20
DCAL	0	1	1	4	6
DE	0	1	3	12	16
DETI	0	1	2	6	9
DFP	0	2	7	40	49
DEL	0	1	1	6	8
DHSSPS	0	1	4	29	34
DOE	0	1	2	15	18
DRD	0	1	4	18	23
DSD	0	1	4	14	19
OFMDFM	1	1	5	16	23
Total	1	12	37	175	225

NICS PERMANENT STAFF AT GRADE 5 & ABOVE LEVEL - 1 APRIL 2007

	Head of NICS	Permanent Secretary Level	Grade 3	Grades 4 & 5	Total
DARD	0	1	4	14	19
DCAL	0	1	1	5	7
DE	0	2	3	13	18
DETI	0	1	2	7	10
DFP	0	2	7	34	43
DEL	0	1	2	6	9
DHSSPS	0	1	5	29	35
DOE	0	1	3	13	17
DRD	0	1	3	13	17
DSD	0	1	4	12	17
OFMDFM	1	1	7	17	26
Total	1	13	41	163	218

NICS PERMANENT STAFF AT GRADE 5 & ABOVE LEVEL - 1 APRIL 2008

	Head of NICS	Permanent Secretary Level	Grade 3	Grades 4 & 5	Total
DARD	0	1	4	14	19
DCAL	0	1	1	2	4
DE	0	2	2	13	17
DETI	0	1	2	7	10
DFP	0	3	6	38	47
DEL	0	1	2	7	10
DHSSPS	0	1	4	20	25
DOE	0	1	3	13	17
DRD	0	1	1	10	12
DSD	0	1	4	14	19
OFMDFM	1	1	6	17	25
Total	1	14	35	155	205

NICS PERMANENT STAFF AT GRADE 5 & ABOVE LEVEL - 1 APRIL 2009

	Head of NICS	Permanent Secretary Level	Grade 3	Grades 4 & 5	Total
DARD	0	1	3	17	21
DCAL	0	1	1	4	6
DE	0	2	2	12	16
DETI	0	1	2	8	11
DFP	0	2	7	36	45
DEL	0	1	3	7	11
DHSSPS	0	1	5	19	25
DOE	0	1	2	11	14
DRD	0	1	3	13	17
DSD	0	1	4	13	18
OFMDFM	1	1	7	24	33
Total	1	13	39	164	217

NICS PERMANENT STAFF AT GRADE 5 & ABOVE LEVEL - 1 APRIL 2010

	Head of NICS	Permanent Secretary Level	Grade 3	Grades 4 & 5	Total
DARD	0	1	4	16	21
DCAL	0	1	1	4	6
DE	0	3	3	12	18
DETI	0	1	1	8	10
DFP	0	2	7	30	39
DEL	0	2	2	7	11
DHSSPS	0	1	4	20	25
DOE	0	1	2	12	15
DRD	0	1	3	13	17
DSD	0	1	4	13	18
OFMDFM	1	1	6	16	24
Total	1	15	37	151	204

Notes: Data sourced from HR Connect at 1 April 2009 & 1 April 2010

Data sourced from HRMS for previous years

Data includes Staff in the 11 Ministerial Depts and their Agencies.

Includes Permanent Staff only

Data is provided on a Headcount basis

Follow up to AQW 1875/11

Civil Service: Pay Bands

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the Pay Scale for each Civil Service grade above Deputy Principal.

(AQW 2119/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I would refer the Member to the reply I provided to Mr Alex Easton in AQW 1853/11 issued on 18 November 2010.

Civil Service: 2009 Pay Award

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when staff in (i) Civil Service Departments; (ii) departmental arms-length bodies; and (iii) non-departmental public bodies will receive the 2009 pay settlement.

(AQW 2123/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Staff at all grades within the Northern Ireland Civil Service departments have received the 2009 pay award.

In terms of Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs), the majority adhere to the pay remit approval process whereby each individual organisation is required to submit pay remit documentation to its parent department detailing pay proposals for their staff groups. Once departments have assessed the business case, and ensured that the pay increase is justified, it must be submitted to DFP for approval.

When staff working within the same organisation are subject to different pay agreements, separate pay remit documentation must be submitted for each group. For example, pay awards for staff at a Senior Civil Service equivalent level are typically determined separately from staff below that level.

Receipt of the 2009-10 pay settlement is therefore dependent upon submission by departments of the appropriate pay remit documentation. To date, the DFP Minister has approved 2009-10 pay awards for the staff groups in the table overleaf.

Invest NI	NI Fire & Rescue Service Admin / manual staff
Invest NI Senior Civil Service (SCS)	NI Fire & Rescue Service Directors
Arts Council NI SCS	Health and Social Care Senior Executives
National Museums NI SCS	Education & Library Board (ELB) Youth & Community Workers
NI Housing Executive Staff	ELB Graphical Technicians
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute industrial staff	ELB Craft and Engineering staff
NI Fishery Harbour Authority non-industrial staff	ELB Foreign Language Assistants
NI Fishery Harbour Authority industrial staff	ELB National Joint Council staff
Livestock and Meat Commission staff	ELB Staff Commission
Livestock and Meat Commission CEO	ELB Teacher related staff
Libraries NI	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment staff
NI Commissioner for Children and Young People SCS	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools staff
Further Education Lecturers	Teachers
Further Education Senior Staff	Industrial Court Chairmen and Panel Members
Further Education non-teaching staff	OITFET President, Vice President, Chairmen and lay members
Ulster Supported Employment Limited	Criminal Justice Inspection Inspectors
Construction Industry Training Board	Probation Board
NI Fire & Rescue Service Wholetime Firefighters	Doctors and Dentists
NI Fire & Rescue Service Control staff	National Health Service staff
NI Fire & Rescue Service Retained staff	

It should be noted that most public bodies for which the Department of Justice (DoJ) is responsible are not included in this return. Most public bodies under DoJ jurisdiction received their 2009-10 pay award prior to devolution of policing and justice. Any outstanding 2009-10 proposals are now subject to the pay remits process, and as with other outstanding pay remits, these will be processed as quickly as possible by DFP once the appropriate documentation is provided.

Civil Service: 2009 Pay Award

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why all staff employed in Civil Service Departments, departmental arms-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies, have not received their 2009 pay settlement.

(AQW 2124/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Staff at all grades within the Northern Ireland Civil Service departments have received the 2009 pay award.

In terms of Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs), the majority adhere to the pay remit approval process whereby each individual organisation is required to submit pay remit documentation to its parent department detailing pay proposals for their staff groups. Once departments have assessed the business case, and ensured that the pay increase is justified, it must be submitted to DFP for approval.

When staff working within the same organisation are subject to different pay agreements, separate pay remit documentation must be submitted for each group. For example, pay awards for staff at a Senior Civil Service equivalent level are typically determined separately from staff below that level.

Receipt of the 2009-10 pay settlement is therefore dependent upon submission by departments of the appropriate pay remit documentation. To date, the DFP Minister has approved 2009-10 pay awards for the staff groups in the table overleaf.

Invest NI	NI Fire & Rescue Service Admin / manual staff
Invest NI Senior Civil Service (SCS)	NI Fire & Rescue Service Directors
Arts Council NI SCS	Health and Social Care Senior Executives
National Museums NI SCS	Education & Library Board (ELB) Youth & Community Workers
NI Housing Executive Staff	ELB Graphical Technicians
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute industrial staff	ELB Craft and Engineering staff
NI Fishery Harbour Authority non-industrial staff	ELB Foreign Language Assistants
NI Fishery Harbour Authority industrial staff	ELB National Joint Council staff
Livestock and Meat Commission staff	ELB Staff Commission
Livestock and Meat Commission CEO	ELB Teacher related staff
Libraries NI	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment staff
NI Commissioner for Children and Young People SCS	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools staff
Further Education Lecturers	Teachers
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NI Fire & Rescue Service Retained staff	

It should be noted that most public bodies for which the Department of Justice (DoJ) is responsible are not included in this return. Most public bodies under DoJ jurisdiction received their 2009-10 pay award prior to devolution of policing and justice. Any outstanding 2009-10 proposals are now subject to the

pay remits process, and as with other outstanding pay remits, these will be processed as quickly as possible by DFP once the appropriate documentation is provided.

Civil Service: 2009 Pay Award

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel which grades within the Civil Service Departments, arms-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies have received their 2009 pay settlement; and which grades have yet to receive their settlement.

(AQW 2125/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Staff at all grades within the Northern Ireland Civil Service departments have received the 2009 pay award.

In terms of Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs), the majority adhere to the pay remit approval process whereby each individual organisation is required to submit pay remit documentation to its parent department detailing pay proposals for their staff groups. Once departments have assessed the business case, and ensured that the pay increase is justified, it must be submitted to DFP for approval.

When staff working within the same organisation are subject to different pay agreements, separate pay remit documentation must be submitted for each group. For example, pay awards for staff at a Senior Civil Service equivalent level are typically determined separately from staff below that level.

Receipt of the 2009-10 pay settlement is therefore dependent upon submission by departments of the appropriate pay remit documentation. To date, the DFP Minister has approved 2009-10 pay awards for the staff groups in the table overleaf.

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Construction Industry Training Board	Probation Board

Invest NI	NI Fire & Rescue Service Admin / manual staff
NI Fire & Rescue Service Wholetime Firefighters	Doctors and Dentists
NI Fire & Rescue Service Control staff	National Health Service staff
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It should be noted that most public bodies for which the Department of Justice (DoJ) is responsible are not included in this return. Most public bodies under DoJ jurisdiction received their 2009-10 pay award prior to devolution of policing and justice. Any outstanding 2009-10 proposals are now subject to the pay remits process, and as with other outstanding pay remits, these will be processed as quickly as possible by DFP once the appropriate documentation is provided.

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2129/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The telephony costs incurred in each of the last five years are detailed below.

Type	Costs
Tariff / Calls 05-06	£454,533
Tariff / Calls 06-07	£436,835
Tariff / Calls 07-08	£373,638
Tariff 08-09	£264,127
Calls 08-09	£149,322
Tariff 09-10	£313,444
Calls 09-10	£142,451

Notes: NICS now utilises a new financial system which facilitates a breakdown of the total telephony cost to call and tariff level for each of the last two financial years.

For financial years 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08, it is only possible to provide the total of tariff and calls.

Travel Disruption Caused by Volcanic Ash in Iceland

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total travel costs incurred by his Department during the periods of travel disruption caused by volcanic ash in Iceland, broken down by costs incurred due to (i) delayed flights; (ii) cancelled flights; and (iii) related accommodation and expenses.

(AQW 2144/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: No costs were incurred by the Department due to delayed flights.

The costs incurred by the Department due to cancelled flights was £725.62. These costs include non-refunded flights, admin fees for refunds, costs lost due to flights not being fully refunded and original booking fees for flights which are non-refundable.

The costs incurred by the Department due to related accommodation and expenses was 66 pence. This relates to a booking fee for an unused hotel.

Civil Service: Overtime

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many hours of overtime were worked by Civil Servants in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2158/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total number of overtime hours claimed by Northern Ireland Civil Service departments (and their agencies) for non-industrial and industrial staff in respect of overtime for the 2009/10 financial year was 204,653.4 hours. The aggregate hours of overtime is not available prior to the introduction of HRConnect.

Due to the format of the data it is not currently possible to provide figures on the number of staff who have worked more than 10 hours in any given week over the last year.

Civil Service: Overtime

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many Civil Service staff worked more than ten hours overtime in any one week in the last twelve months.

(AQW 2159/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total number of overtime hours claimed by Northern Ireland Civil Service departments (and their agencies) for non-industrial and industrial staff in respect of overtime for the 2009/10 financial year was 204,653.4 hours. The aggregate hours of overtime is not available prior to the introduction of HRConnect.

Due to the format of the data it is not currently possible to provide figures on the number of staff who have worked more than 10 hours in any given week over the last year.

North/South Implementation Bodies

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much the Executive allocates annually to the budget of each of the North/South Implementation Bodies; and what is the function of each of the bodies.

(AQW 2177/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The detail of the budget allocations to each of the North/South Implementation Bodies is set out in Chapter 7 (Departmental Budget Allocations) of the Budget 2008-11 document, which was published and approved by the Assembly in January 2008. The allocations for 2010-11 were further updated in the Executive's Revised 2010-11 Spending Plans published and approved by the Assembly in April 2010. Both documents may be accessed on www.pfgbudgetni.gov.uk.

The Executive is currently considering the Budget for 2011-15, which will include allocations for the North/South Implementation Bodies.

The functions of the Bodies are set out in Annex 1 to Schedule 1 of The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 available on www.statutelaw.gov.uk/.

Health Budget

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of his pledge to ring-fence the part of the health budget which is protected in the rest of the UK, whether social care, including child protection, will also be ring-fenced.

(AQW 2187/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The detail of the budget allocations to each of the North/South Implementation Bodies is set out in Chapter 7 (Departmental Budget Allocations) of the Budget 2008-11 document, which was published and approved by the Assembly in January 2008. The allocations for 2010-11 were further updated in the Executive's Revised 2010-11 Spending Plans published and approved by the Assembly in April 2010. Both documents may be accessed on www.pfgbudgetni.gov.uk.

The Executive is currently considering the Budget for 2011-15, which will include allocations for the North/South Implementation Bodies.

The functions of the Bodies are set out in Annex 1 to Schedule 1 of The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 available on www.statutelaw.gov.uk/.

HR Connect: Complaints from MLAs and MPs

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many complaints HR Connect has received from MPs and MLAs in each month since it became operational up to the end of October 2010; and to outline (i) the reason for the complaint; and (ii) the outcome.

(AQW 2196/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is provided in the attached table.

Month	Volume	i) Reason for Complaint	ii) Outcome
Aug 2009	2	Disagreement over overpayment of salary	Upheld
		Stress caused by regular phone calls regarding return to work related to disciplinary case ongoing at time	Upheld
Feb 2010	1	Stress caused by incorrect pay during long term sickness absence and poor customer service from HRConnect	Upheld
May 2010	1	Return from maternity leave which led to payroll difficulty	Upheld
Sept 2010	3	Deduction of outstanding overpayment from Equal Pay lump sum	Not Upheld
		Overpayment notifications & deduction from Equal Pay lump sum	Explanation of deductions & notifications provided
		Delays in pension rate of pay process and in forwarding documentation relating to Employment Support Allowance	Upheld
Total:	7		

HR Connect: Payroll Services

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many times, since it became operational, HR Connect's payroll services performance level has fallen below (i) 98 per cent; and (ii) 99.9 per cent.

(AQW 2198/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The HRConnect payroll service became operational in November 2008. The table below describes the number of instances where performance fell below 98% and 99.9%.

	Nov 2008 – Dec 2009	Jan 2010 – Oct 2010
< 98.0%	25	0
< 99.9%	40	0

Note: Total number of 40 includes the 25 instances when performance fell below 98.0%

HR Connect: Service Charge

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of the abatements deducted from HR Connect's service charge in each month since it became operational.

(AQW 2199/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total abatement applied in each month is set out in the table attached.

Month	Total Abatement
Oct-07	£0
Nov-07	£2,888
Dec-07	£6,687
Jan-08	£22,484
Feb-08	£0
Mar-08	£11,670
Apr-08	£6,373
May-08	£0
Jun-08	£6,376
Jul-08	£3,187
Aug-08	£0
Sep-08	£0
Oct-08	£9,560
Nov-08	£12,747
Dec-08	£137,952
Jan-09	£140,023
Feb-09	£140,023
Mar-09	£75,119
Apr-09	£102,938
May-09	£93,277
Jun-09	£125,299
Jul-09	£19,361
Aug-09	£26,118
Sep-09	£15,439
Oct-09	£27,185
Nov-09	£4,412
Dec-09	£17,913
Jan-10	£1,638
Feb-10	£1,711

Month	Total Abatement
Mar-10	£9,378
Apr-10	£22,477
May-10	£8,582
Jun-10	£7,258
Jul-10	£2,476
Aug-10	£22,554
Sep-10	£3,293

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2219/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The impact of my Department's Budget 2010 resource and capital spending proposals on equality, good relations, poverty/social inclusion and sustainable development has been assessed through a high-level screening exercise. The Department's spending proposals included bids for operating costs and investment associated with the 2011 Census, Land and Property Services, NI Civil Service office accommodation and NI Direct. The assessment of these proposals revealed neutral or positive impact in relation to Section 75 groups.

Vacant Properties

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total number of properties that are currently vacant in each Council area; and what is the total rateable value of these properties.

(AQW 2246/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of properties recorded as vacant in each council area on 21 November 2010 is detailed in the attached table.

Vacant domestic properties are not rated; vacant non-domestic properties are rated at 50% liability, subject to a number of exclusions and exemptions.

Properties move into and out of occupation on a daily basis, and there is often a lag in ratepayers informing LPS of changes to occupancy. LPS continues to work closely with District Councils and other organisations to ensure the maintenance of accurate records of occupation and vacancy; the implementation of Rating of Empty Homes on 01 October 2011 will be preceded by a programme of work to ascertain ownership details for vacant domestic properties to facilitate billing.

Council	Number of vacant domestic properties	Number of vacant non-domestic properties ³	Total Capital Value (CV) £	Total Net Annual Value (NAV) £
Antrim	1,365	387	£115,042,050	£3,787,555
Ards	2,158	564	£246,890,400	£3,079,468
Armagh	2,371	525	£200,631,600	£2,693,760
Ballymena	1,446	447	£136,606,400	£3,508,620
Ballymoney	870	200	£78,084,200	£1,106,107

Council	Number of vacant domestic properties	Number of vacant non-domestic properties³	Total Capital Value (CV) £	Total Net Annual Value (NAV) £
Banbridge	1,642	387	£148,178,050	£2,040,505
Belfast	9,185	4,279	£962,359,750	£46,688,310
Carrickfergus	833	221	£70,204,250	£1,972,145
Castlereagh	1,412	262	£169,158,250	£3,066,670
Coleraine	2,477	480	£293,914,750	£3,917,285
Cookstown	1,361	401	£120,702,000	£1,753,195
Craigavon	3,510	863	£237,186,750	£7,394,030
Derry	1,919	823	£169,282,050	£9,590,200
Down	2,336	611	£234,383,513	£3,042,521
Dungannon & South Tyrone	2,591	591	£232,708,700	£2,868,103
Fermanagh	3,538	697	£276,283,000	£4,391,656
Larne	1,073	253	£82,961,600	£1,112,565
Limavady	1,224	277	£91,174,900	£2,254,150
Lisburn	3,021	744	£341,547,850	£9,149,020
Magherafelt	1,238	383	£109,500,500	£2,113,560
Moyle	838	114	£90,106,950	£426,770
Newry & Mourne	3,798	951	£352,673,250	£6,310,925
Newtownabbey	1,326	515	£123,971,000	£6,718,555
North Down	1,776	423	£258,630,500	£4,400,570
Omagh	2,160	584	£168,520,000	£4,562,590
Strabane	1,328	362	£90,609,100	£1,761,905

Notes:

- 1 The table excludes 37 properties for which the sector could not be identified.
- 2 The figures in the table above include properties with no current effective valuation. For those properties, the sector has been derived using either the last valuation or the valuation currently pending. These properties were excluded in the recent answer to AQW 1955/11, which accounts for the differences between the two answers.
- 3 Non-domestic figures include 260 mixed properties which also have a domestic valuation.

£18 Billion Capital Investment Package

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the Comprehensive Spending Review, what is the anticipated annual shortfall in the £18 billion capital investment package agreed at St Andrews.

(AQW 2247/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The £18 billion investment package agreed at St Andrews covered the period 2005 to 2017. This £18 billion of investment was to be funded from a variety of sources,

including capital allocations from HM Treasury, Reinvestment and Reform Initiative borrowing and anticipated capital receipts. It is therefore not possible to compare directly on a year-by-year basis with the 2010 Spending Review outcome.

However, my officials estimate that gross capital expenditure over the period 2005-06 to the end of 2010-11 will total some £9.1 billion. Based on the 2010 Spending Review capital DEL outcome, the estimated capital expenditure to the end of 2014-15 will be £13.7 billion. This means that, in order to meet the St Andrews commitment of £18 billion worth of capital investment by 2016-17, there would need to be over £4 billion of capital investment in the final two years following this Spending Review period.

£18 Billion Capital Investment Package

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the Comprehensive Spending Review, for his assessment of the impact on jobs of the annual shortfall in the £18 billion capital investment package agreed at St Andrews.

(AQW 2248/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The impending capital DEL reductions of some 40% in real terms over the 2010 Spending Review period will undoubtedly have an adverse impact on the local construction industry.

However, it is important to recognise that not all capital expenditure is on construction projects. It is therefore not possible to quantify with any degree of accuracy the impact on jobs in the local economy. The exact impact will depend partly on the outcome of the local Budget process and partly on each individual Minister's priorities and budget allocation decisions.

It is also important to note that the likely capital spend by the Executive in 2011-12, at approximately £1.2 billion, will be similar to the level delivered in 2004-05.

Funding from the Special European Union Programmes Body

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) why funding from the Special European Union Programmes Body to Families Acting for Innocent Relatives has been stopped; (ii) whether an investigation has been carried out into the finances of the organisation; and (iii) to detail any financial irregularities which were uncovered; and any legal action which will be taken as a result.

(AQW 2249/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR) received funding totalling £880,383 from the PEACE III Programme in respect of three projects (i) CAPABLE, (ii) EINSTEIN and (iii) SACRED. The Letters of Offer issued to FAIR for each of these projects contained a number of conditions under which the grants were awarded.

A complaint was received by the SEUPB regarding FAIR's handling of procurement procedure. SEUPB's subsequent review of FAIR's procedures uncovered failures in the organisation's ability to adhere to the conditions associated with the funding set out in the original letters of offer.

Following discussions with the Accountable Departments involved in the PEACE III Programme, SEUPB revoked the three Letters of Offer previously issued to the organisation.

As further investigations into this matter remain ongoing, SEUPB is unable to provide specific detail on the irregularities identified.

Occupational Health Service

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much each Department has contributed towards the overall costs of running the Occupational Health Service in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2263/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The financial contribution of each Department towards the overall running costs of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Occupational Health Service in each of the last five years is set out in the table overleaf.

	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09	2007/08	2006/07
OFMDFM	£10,326	£10,000	£12,064	£11,000	£9,832
DARD	£106,995	£125,500	£124,220	£122,539	£97,387
DCAL	£8,920	£8,000	£8,004	£13,000	£12,264
DE	£17,574	£18,000	£19,459	£19,000	£18,052
DEL	£58,839	£52,500	£53,534	£51,000	£48,394
DETI	£14,056	£11,500	£19,720	£20,104	£19,585
DFP	£97,269	£93,000	£94,482	£85,000	£80,639
DHSSPS	£22,898	£23,500	£26,042	£27,419	£27,329
DOE	£80,470	£78,500	£85,115	£81,000	£74,956
NIO / DOJ	£152,467	£176,000	£213,373	£214,799	£190,417
DRD	£112,222	£105,500	£110,118	£110,187	£130,143
DSD	£253,706	£248,000	£260,351	£257,231	£249,582

Senior Civil Servants Pay Rise for 2010

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether senior civil servants received a pay rise for 2010; and if so, to outline the terms and conditions of the pay rise.

(AQW 2265/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Senior civil servants in the Northern Ireland Civil Service have not received a pay rise for 2010. I will take decisions on the future pay arrangements for senior civil servants in the context of my deliberations on the Senior Salaries Review Body report on SCS pay in the NICS.

Irish Government: Financial Assistance

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any engagement he has had, or plans to have, with the Irish Government in relation to the effect its request for financial assistance from the EU and the International Monetary Fund will have on the cross-border economy.

(AQW 2342/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: As yet I have had no direct engagement with the Irish Government on their request for financial assistance from the EU and the International Monetary Fund.

However I do meet regularly with my Irish counterpart Brian Lenihan both bilaterally and in NSMC formats to discuss ongoing issues in relation to the economy and the banking sector, as do our officials. I will be discussing the economic implications of the Republic of Ireland bail-out for Northern Ireland at our next meeting.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Local Enhanced Hospital in Omagh

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what priority will be given to the local enhanced hospital in Omagh in relation to other capital projects.

(AQW 1923/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The Omagh Hospital Project is one of my top priorities, however as you are aware deliberations on the budget for the next few years are ongoing. Until the budget for my department becomes clear I am unable to comment further on this issue.

Diabetes

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) adults; and (ii) children in each Health and Social Care Trust area have been diagnosed with diabetes in the last twelve months.

(AQW 1925/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Diabetes

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed as diabetic in each Health and Social Care Trust area in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1926/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the Quality & Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the General Medical Services contract, the total number of GP-registered patients aged 17 and over with diabetes mellitus is recorded. Table 1 shows the total number of people on the QOF diabetes register by Health and Social Care Trust, for the last three years.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PATIENTS ON DIABETES REGISTER (AGED 17 AND OVER) 2008 - 2010

Health and Social Care Trust ¹	Number of patients on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over)		
	2008	2009	2010
Belfast	14,252	15,073	15,935
South Eastern	10,941	11,665	12,134
Northern	14,752	15,954	17,008
Southern	10,791	11,574	12,336
Western	10,086	10,800	11,567
Northern Ireland	60,822	65,066	68,980

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS)

- 1 The Diabetes Register does not include patients' home address so patients have been assigned to Trust areas on the basis of the location of the GP practice at which they are registered rather than the patients' area of residence.

Foot Care for Blind and Partially Sighted Older People

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to providing essential foot care to blind and partially sighted older people.

(AQW 1943/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People who are referred to a Health and Social Care Trust, including older clients who are blind and partially sighted, will have their individual needs assessed and a treatment plan put in place depending on their specific podiatry requirements.

Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many theatre sessions were (i) scheduled; and (ii) completed at the Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt in September 2010.

(AQW 1944/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There were 69 theatre sessions scheduled and 71 theatre sessions completed at the Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt in September 2010.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust Waiting Times

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area have been waiting for more than 9 weeks for (i) a primary care appointment; and (ii) a secondary care appointment; and what action is being taken to reduce waiting times at the Trust.

(AQW 1945/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Waiting time information for a primary care appointment is not available.
- (ii) The waiting time position for a first outpatient appointment, a diagnostic service or inpatient treatment at hospitals in Northern Ireland at the 30th June 2010, can be found at the following link:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-activity_stats-2/waiting_times_main/waiting_times-3.htm

The Health and Social Care Board is funding additional work to achieve this position. The Trust is currently providing extra clinics, daycases and inpatient services from now to the end of the year to meet the agreed position by March 2011.

Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his Department has for Wards 2 and 3 at the Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt.

(AQW 1946/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As set out in the document Developing Better Services, the Mid Ulster Hospital will in the longer term function as a local hospital and subject to budget will play a valuable role in providing a significant proportion of hospital services to the local population, including inpatient rehabilitation services alongside a range of outpatient and diagnostic services

The specific utilisation of Wards 2 and 3 is a matter for the Northern Trust. I understand however that the Wards will continue to be used to manage patients who require inpatient medical care.

Health Visitor's Assessments

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there is no longer provision for a Health Visitor's assessment of children at 2 years and 6 months.

(AQW 1951/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Based on evidence of 'Health for All Children', 4th Edition (Hall and Elliman), the recommendations of the National Screening Committee, guidance from the National Institute for Health, Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Autism Spectrum Disorder review and action plan, the Northern Ireland Child Health Promotion Programme was updated (issued June 2010).

The new schedule of contacts within the programme includes an assessment by the family health visitor at 2 years of age. This is detailed within guidance as between 2 and 2 years 6 months (at latest). This updates the previous schedule issued in 2006 which did not include a two or two and a half years assessment for all children but indicated that based on the outcome of the contact at 15 months, a health visitor might assess the need to include a two year contact with specific children.

Causeway Hospital

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1167/11, when he anticipates that the business case for a renal unit at the Causeway Hospital will be forwarded to his Department for assessment.

(AQW 1967/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust and the Health and Social Care Board are continuing to work together on this issue. Until this work is completed I cannot give a timescale on the timing of submission of a business case to my Department for consideration.

Outstanding Service by Ambulance or Medical Staff

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what arrangements his Department has in place to recognise outstanding service by either ambulance or medical staff.

(AQW 1973/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Outstanding service by ambulance or medical staff is recognised in different ways.

The Northern Ireland Clinical Excellence Awards Scheme aims to ensure recognition of exceptional personal contributions made by individual consultant doctors, locally, nationally and internationally, who show a commitment to achieving the delivery of high quality care to patients and to the continuous improvement of Health and Social Care.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) recognises outstanding service through Letters of Appreciation to individual staff from its Chief Executive as a result of compliments received from members of the public about the service provided to them.

In addition, non-emergency staff receive recognition by the Ambulance Service Long Service Medal, the criteria for which is 20 years service, whereas emergency response staff are recognised by the Long Service (Emergency Duties) and Good Conduct Medal, the criteria for which is 20 years service to include 7 years frontline duties.

Threatening, Abusive or Violent Behaviour by Hospital Patients

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last three years, how many times a patient has been removed from a hospital ward for threatening, abusive or violent behaviour, broken down by hospital.

(AQW 1978/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not readily available in the form, requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost

Threatening, Abusive or Violent Behaviour by Hospital Patients

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last three years, how many times a patient has had to be physically restrained after becoming threatening, abusive or violent, broken down by hospital.

(AQW 1979/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available in the format requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Threatening, Abusive or Violent Behaviour by Hospital Patients

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last three years, how many times the PSNI has been called to a hospital to deal with a patient who had become threatening, abusive or violent, broken down by hospital.

(AQW 1980/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of times the PSNI has been called to deal with a patient who has become threatening, abusive or violent in each HSC Trust in each of the last three years is provided in the table below.

HSC Trust	2007- 08	2008-09	2009 - 10
Belfast HSC Trust	95	97	218
Northern HSC Trust	39	67	42
Southern HSC Trust	24	34	41
South Eastern HSC Trust	Not recorded	26	124
Western HSC Trust	41	94	74

Patients Showing Symptoms of Alcohol or Drug Abuse

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the policy followed by each hospital's Accident and Emergency Unit when patients present showing symptoms of alcohol or drug abuse.

(AQW 1982/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department takes the issue of violence against staff and patients very seriously. All HSC Trust's Accident and Emergency Units have a robust zero tolerance policy in place with responsibility for staff safety placed at senior executive level.

Patients who attend Accident and Emergency Units affected by the ingestion of drugs or alcohol are treated accordingly. The zero tolerance policy dictates if their behaviour is deemed inappropriate and their clinical assessment has deemed them suitable for discharge then they are discharged. Patients who are violent or aggressive towards members of staff and whose clinical condition has been assessed as suitable for discharge are removed from the premises by security staff or the PSNI.

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1290/11, to outline the targets that were in place prior to April 2010 for the treatment and discharge of patients at Accident and Emergency Departments.

(AQW 1984/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Targets for the treatment and discharge of patients at Accident and Emergency departments are published in "Priorities for Action" and are available at the following link. http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/priorities_for_action

Special Education Centre in Newry

Mr M Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's plans for staffing levels at the Special Education Centre in Newry.

(AQW 1985/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is the responsibility of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust) to provide Health and Social Care services within this area. I have been assured by the Trust that the staffing levels at the new Windsor Day Care Centre, in terms of both numbers and experience, will be relevant to address the needs of the people attending the centre to ensure that they receive an appropriate level of care.

Special Education Centre in Newry

Mr M Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's plans for the Special Education Centre in Newry.

(AQW 1986/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Provision of day care services within Northern Ireland is the responsibility of Health and Social Care Trusts. I am advised that the Southern Health and Social Care Trust's plans for Windsor Day Care Centre are to continue to meet the needs of adults with a learning disability who reside within the Newry locality and who have been assessed as requiring the services provided at this facility.

Selling Revenue-generating Assets to Offset any Capital Shortfall

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to sell revenue-generating assets to offset any capital shortfall.

(AQW 1988/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department does not have any revenue generating assets to sell to offset against capital shortfall.

Mater Hospital in Belfast

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can confirm that services at the Mater Hospital in Belfast will be protected and retained.

(AQW 1999/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As part of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, the Mater Hospital provides, and will continue to provide, a wide range of acute services.

The detailed provision of services at the Mater Hospital is the responsibility of the Belfast Trust. The Trust has recently completed a public consultation on proposals to reorganise the delivery of acute services in Belfast and is expected to publish its findings in due course.

Value of Donated Artwork

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an estimate of the total value of the artwork donated to his Department and the Health and Social Care Trusts in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2001/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No artwork has been donated to my Department in the last five years. Information on artwork donated over the last five years to Trusts is not collected centrally.

Desertcreat Training College

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the expenditure incurred to date by his Department in relation to the creation of the Desertcreat Training College.
(AQW 2002/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To date, my Department's expenditure in respect of this project is nil.

Registration of Childminders

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts for the registration of childminders; and how many new applicants are currently awaiting registration in each of the Trust areas.
(AQW 2003/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would refer the Member to my reply to AQW 1679/11.

Clostridium Difficile Infection

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently diagnosed with the C-Difficile infection in each Health and Social Care Trust area; and for his assessment of the effectiveness of current controls of this infection compared to its control in previous years.
(AQW 2023/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of hospital patients being treated for Clostridium difficile by each Health and Social Care Trust at midday on Thursday 11 November 2010 was as follows: Northern Trust - 6; Belfast Trust - 7; South Eastern Trust - 2; Southern Trust - 2; Western Trust - 1. One of the patients in the Belfast Trust was admitted on 10 November with community-onset disease; this case will not be attributed to the Trust as part of the mandatory reporting system.

In Northern Ireland in 2006/07 there were 1,026 cases of Clostridium difficile in hospital patients aged over 65. In 2009/10 there were 474 cases in hospital patients aged over 65. This 54% decrease suggests that the prevention and control of Clostridium difficile have been more effective in the past three years than previously.

Pain Management Specialist

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients are currently waiting to be assessed by a pain management specialist.
(AQW 2024/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting times for a first outpatient appointment within the pain management specialty at the 30th June 2010, the most recent date for which information is available can be found at the following link:

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-activity_stats-2/waiting_times_main/waiting_times-3.htm

Efficiency Savings

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to what extent he intends to prioritise efficiency savings over cuts in preparation for the next Budget.

(AQW 2028/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The most efficient and effective use of all available resources for DHSSPS is a key priority for me and I would always prioritise efficiency savings over cuts.

Treatment Outside Northern Ireland

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1369/11, to detail the conditions for which treatment outside Northern Ireland was provided; and whether treatment for these conditions is now available in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2039/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The conditions requiring treatment outside Northern Ireland included:

- Eating Disorders
- Gender Disorder
- Mood / conduct / Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Psychosis
- Neuropsychiatric Disorders
- Personality disorder

While services are available in Northern Ireland for each of these conditions, it is the severity/complexity of a patient's condition which may result in a clinical decision being taken to have them treated in a specialist facility outside Northern Ireland.

Ambulance Control Centres

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) on how many occasions, in each of the last ten years, ambulance control centres ceased to function; (ii) the duration of each cessation; (iii) the number of calls that were missed as a result of each cessation; and (iv) what emergency measures were put in place to ensure ambulance cover was not disrupted in each instance.

(AQW 2044/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been informed by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), that there have been no occasions during the past ten years when ambulance control centres have ceased to function.

Patient Client Council

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the reasons why the Patient Client Council decided to spend a day at Antrim Area Hospital Accident and Emergency Unit on 8 November 2010; (ii) the cost of this visit; and (iii) the number of complaints received in relation to Antrim Area Hospital's Accident and Emergency Unit on 8 November 2010.

(AQW 2058/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Patient and Client Council (PCC) has advised me that the purpose of the visit was to gather patients' views on the A and E service at Antrim Area Hospital and to better understand their experiences whilst in an A and E department.

The visit was part of the PCC's ongoing operational activities and as such no additional costs were incurred in making the visit.

The PCC does not have an inspection role, nor a formal role in receiving or managing complaints. Rather, its emphasis is in promoting public involvement and assisting individuals in their communications with the HSC.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised me that no complaints were received on 8 November about the A and E service at Antrim Area Hospital

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2064/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in each of the last five years is shown in the table

TABLE: DHSSPS BT COSTS 2005 - 2010

Year	Cost (£)
2005/06	9,525.77
2006/07	9,467.26
2007/08	6,956.79
2008/09	19,846.91
2009/10	16,746.07

The increase in costs for 2008/09 and 2009/10 was due to increased use of conference calls, particularly in relation to the Swine Flu Emergency, and also to developments in telecommunication networks covering Health and Social Care sites and managed by the former Directorate of Information Systems (DIS), now part of the BSO (Business Services Organisation).

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all the companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for his Department.

(AQW 2065/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunication services to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are Vodafone, Orange, BT and Eircom.

Physically or Mentally Unfit for Court Proceedings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what procedures, tests or examinations are carried out by medical staff to determine whether a person is physically or mentally unfit for court proceedings.

(AQW 2069/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Medical staff will use a range of procedures, tests, or examinations to assess whether a person is fit for Court proceedings. Due to the variety of physical and mental health conditions that could give rise to the need for such an assessment, it is not possible to specify individual procedures, tests or examinations. The medical practitioner's recommendation regarding the fitness of a person for Court proceedings, is based on their overall assessment of that individual's current physical and/or mental health, and through exercising their professional judgment in keeping with good medical practice.

Causeway Hospital

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's plans for Accident and Emergency provision at the Causeway Hospital over the next three years; and whether his Department has considered any proposals to reduce the number of hours that the service operates.

(AQW 2127/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: While the delivery of services at the Causeway Hospital is a matter for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust as the service provider, I can advise that the Trust has no plans to change accident and emergency services at Causeway Hospital and has recently implemented a number of initiatives in order to sustain services on a 24 hour 7 day week basis.

Rossneal Assessment Unit in Derry

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the current status of the Rossneal Assessment Unit in Derry; and to outline his future plans for this facility.

(AQW 2161/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Rossneal is a purpose built assessment unit which provides 8 beds for short term assessment of children and young people.

The Western Health and Social Services Trust propose to close this unit in 2011 and replace it with a rapid response service to support children and their families in the community.

This change is part of the planned review of residential child care services carried out in as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2008 and was consulted upon in 2008.

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases were treated by each Accident and Emergency Unit in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; and (iii) 2010 to date.

(AQW 2164/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of attendances at each A&E unit is published annually and is available from:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-activity_stats-2/emergency_care-3/hospital_statistics-3_emergency_care_annual.htm

Emergency Transfers out of Tyrone County Hospital

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients had emergency transfers out of Tyrone County Hospital in the last twelve months; and of these, how many were transferred from the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre.

(AQW 2188/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to identify how many transfers out of Tyrone County Hospital in the last twelve months were emergencies.

Minor Ailments Scheme

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the Minor Ailments Scheme, which was introduced in 2009.

(AQW 2202/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: An evaluation of the Minor Ailments Scheme has identified high levels of professional and public satisfaction with the scheme and that it is a useful vehicle in providing treatment to patients. However the evaluation also identified that most

consultations with pharmacists were for symptomatic relief of colds and coughs rather than for conditions which need to be treated.

In order to achieve a more effective use of the limited resources available and to ensure the scheme continues to provide greatest benefit to the people in Northern Ireland, changes have been made to adjust the range of conditions which can be treated under the scheme. The scheme will now focus on conditions which require treatment and not those conditions from which, in most instances, people will recover from in a matter of days, with or without medication.

Ambulance Call-outs in the Limavady Area

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many ambulance call-outs in the Limavady area occurred between the hours of 11pm and 8.30am in (i) June 2010; (ii) July 2010; (iii) August 2010; (iv) September 2010; and (v) October 2010.

(AQW 2221/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below.

2010	Number of calls-outs 11.30pm - 8.30am
June	48
July	50
August	42
September	45
October	44

It should be noted that only one third of these calls involved life-threatening incidents.

Funding from the Public Health Agency for Healthy Living Centres

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the difference in funding from the Public Health Agency for Healthy Living Centres in Belfast and West of the Bann, which means that HLCs in Belfast and the Ards Peninsula have received up to £100,000 per annum for core costs while HLCs West of the Bann have only received around £50,000 per annum for the same purposes.

(AQW 2268/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The difference in funding provided to Healthy Living Centres (HLCs) in the Eastern and Western areas is due to historic spending decisions made by the former Health & Social Services Boards (HSSB). In March 2007, the Eastern HSSB agreed a recurrent allocation of £1 million per annum to meet the core requirements of the then 11 HLCs (approximately £100,000 per organisation). In the same period an amount of £250,000 was allocated by the Western HSSB to support the core costs of the 5 Western HLCs. Broadly £50k per organisation.

The PHA and HSCB recognise the historic disparity in core funding and this will be a matter for consideration in the context of the pending Budget 2010 allocations.

Allen Ward and Cherrytree House of the Royal Hospital for Sick Children

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the building works at the Allen Ward and Cherrytree House of the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Belfast.

(AQW 2270/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has advised that this work entails the reconfiguring of Allen Ward and Cherry Tree House to offer more side wards, parent accommodation and staff area and offices.

Phase 1 of the work has just begun and it is anticipated that all of these works will be completed by the end of the financial year.

Attempted Suicide

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have presented at Craigavon Area Hospital in the last six months as a result of attempted suicide.
(AQW 2317/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Mephedrone Addiction

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with a mephedrone addiction in the last three years; and what treatment and addiction facilities are available to young people seeking to break their addiction.
(AQW 2352/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Drug Misuse Database (DMD), which collects information on problem drug users presenting to services for treatment, indicates that 34 problem drug users presented for treatment in 2009/2010 with mephedrone reported as the main problem drug. Mephedrone was first added to the DMD list of drugs in November 2009, so no information is available for 2007/08 and 2008/09.

However, these figures do not represent those that have been diagnosed with a mephedrone addiction. No information is held centrally on the number of people diagnosed with a mephedrone addiction as mephedrone is not one of the controlled drugs covered by The Drug Addicts Index.

Substance misuse services available throughout Northern Ireland include awareness raising, information and prevention; access to the National Drugs Helpline (0800 77 66 00); community based counselling and mentoring services for those aged under 18; and access to statutory treatment and support services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, through GP referrals.

Department of Justice

Non-nationals within the Prison Population

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current percentage of non-nationals within the prison population, on remand and sentenced, broken down by each prison, including the Juvenile Justice Centre and Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre.
(AQW 2101/11)

Minister of Justice (Mr D Ford): On 22 November there were 130 non-nationals being detained in prison.

The percentage of non-nationals within the prison population, remand and sentenced is broken down in the table below.

TABLE 1.

	Sentenced	Remand
Maghaberry non-national	18	75
Total population	362	446
% of population	5%	17%
Magilligan non-national	28	0
Total population	470	0
% of population	6%	0
Hydebank non-national	3	6
Total population	150	100
% of population	2%	6%

I can confirm that there are currently no non-nationals being held in the Juvenile Justice Centre.

Funding for Prisoners

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) which prisoners are entitled to receive comfort funding from external bodies or charities; (ii) how much funding is permitted per prisoner; and (iii) which external bodies or charities are involved.

(AQW 2102/11)

Minister of Justice:

- (i) External bodies which provide so-called comfort funding apply their own criteria with regard to which prisoners may benefit. (NIPS are not in a position to provide an answer in relation to any third party.)
- (ii) The amount of funding provided is at the discretion of individual external bodies or charities. However, in practical terms it is usually around £10 per individual prisoner in receipt of a donation.
- (iii) The majority of comfort funding is provided by St Vincent de Paul, however any other bona fide charitable or religious organisation can provide a similar service.

District Policing Partnerships and Community Safety Partnerships

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of Justice what measures his Department is taking to ensure that, when District Policing Partnerships and Community Safety Partnerships are merged, they will attract as broad a spectrum of community participation as possible.

(AQW 2136/11)

Minister of Justice: The proposed 'Policing and Community Safety Partnerships' (PCSPs) are intended to attract a broad spectrum of community participation. They will also be statutory bodies in their own right, and will have equality obligations to fulfil.

There will be three kinds of members: elected members; independent members; and representatives of delivery agencies.

The elected members will be appointed in line with the membership of the council.

Independent members will be appointed to ensure that the Partnership is as far as practicable representative of the community overall. They will bring a wealth of experience to the Partnerships and will be able to reflect the diversity of the community in the district in which the Partnership operates.

I also anticipate that each PCSP will designate a range of different organisations from both the statutory and voluntary/community sectors to send a representative to be a member of the PCSP. Each PCSP will designate at least four such organisations.

In addition to the composition of the Partnership itself, each PCSP will be able to set up committees to look at specific issues. These committees might be responsible for specific projects, themes or neighbourhoods. In addition to members of the PCSP, these committees would be able to co-opt people who are not members of the PCSP. There would be no maximum size. The ability to set up these committees provides PCSPs with the flexibility to engage additional community and delivery partners as and when required.

Furthermore, the statutory functions of the PCSPs will include the responsibility to engage with the public more generally. To operate effectively, they will have to obtain the cooperation of the public with the police in preventing crime and enhancing community safety, and to obtain the views of the public about matters concerning policing and the enhancing of community safety.

Sentences

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Justice what consideration has been given to increasing the sentences of people who have been found guilty of assaulting a worker who is dealing with members of the public. (AQW 2238/11)

Minister of Justice: The criminal offence of common assault applies equally to all potential victims. I have included in the Justice Bill (at Clause 56) a provision to increase the maximum custodial penalty that a magistrates' court may give for common assault or battery from 3 months to 6 months.

Respect for Shopkeepers Campaign

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Justice what action his Department intends to take to support the Respect for Shopkeepers campaign which aims to eliminate attacks on staff in the commercial sector. (AQW 2240/11)

Minister of Justice: My Department works closely with the business community and other key stakeholders through the Business Crime Partnership to address business and retail crime.

I deplore any and all attacks on staff in the commercial sector and I fully support any campaign that raises awareness of this issue. Whilst my Department has not been approached to date by representatives of the Respect for Shopkeepers campaign, any issues raised in relation to such attacks will be fully considered by the organisations represented on the Business Crime Partnership.

Department for Regional Development

Single Tender Actions and Contract Extensions

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1596/11, for the single tender actions and contract extensions, to detail (i) the cost; (ii) when work commenced; and (iii) when approval was granted and at what grade. (AQW 1918/11)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): My response to AQW 1596/11 provided a table summarising the number of Single Tender Actions (STAs) and Contract Extensions (CEs) in each of the last five years as follows:

Financial Year	Single Tender Actions	Contract Extensions without Tender
2005 / 06	7	2
2006 / 07	6	2
2007 / 08	-	1
2008 / 09	4	2
2009 / 10	5	4
Totals	22	11

Appendix A sets out details on (i) the cost; (ii) when work commenced; (iii) when approval was granted and at what grade regarding the 22 STAs referred to in the table above. The STA contract for Belfast City Airport – Noise Monitoring was included as a 2006/07 contract in my response to AQW 1596/11 but should have been recorded as a 2005/06 contract. Appendix A includes that contract as a 2005/06 one.

Appendix B sets out the information sought for seven of the eleven CEs referred to in the table above. A further analysis of the eleven contracts has shown that four of them do not fall into the “contract extension without tender” category. Accordingly, the attached Appendix B only includes the required details for the appropriate seven contract extensions. Additionally, the CE for the Rapid Transit contract was commenced in the 2007/08 year and not in 2006/07. As a result there are two CEs detailed at Appendix B for 2007/08.

My response to AQW 1596/11 referred to my previous responses to AQWs 416/11 and 417/11 which set out the numbers of STAs and CEs in Roads Service in each of the last five years. Appendices C and D of this reply provide details on the cost, when work commenced and approvals in respect of these contracts. One of the three Roads Service contracts set out as an STA in my response to AQW 416/11 related to 2004/05 instead of 2005/06. Accordingly, Appendix C provides the details sought for two rather than three contracts in 2005/06.

APPENDIX A
DRD CORE BUSINESS AREAS - SINGLE TENDER ACTIONS

Year	Contract Name	Cost of Contract	When work commenced	When approval was granted	Grade of officer who approved the STA
2005/06	Legal advice on City of Derry Airport - State aid application	£999	12/08/2005	12/08/2005	Grade 7
	EU Project Assessment	£766	06/09/2005	06/09/2005	Deputy Principal
	Accessibility Analysis	£5,775	01/12/2005	25/11/2005	Grade 3
	Belfast - Bangor Track Relay	£210	06/12/2005	December 2005	Grade 3
	Belfast - Bangor Track Relay	£5,455	12/12/2005	December 2005	Grade 3
	Water Reform Programme - Risk Health Check	£6,428	Feb 2006	24/02/2006	Grade 3
	Belfast City Airport - Noise Monitoring	£4,035	20/03/2005	13/03/2005	Grade 7
	Her Majesty Rail Inspectors (HMRI) Costings in respect of Commissioning New Rolling Stock	£3,320	01/04/2005	Not applicable as statutory requirement to use / engage HMRI	Grade 7
2006/07	Update to the 2003 Retail Study	£15,190	01/02/2007	12/01/2007	Grade 3
	Water Reform Programme - Communications Brand Audit	£10,000	01/04/2006	27/03/2006	Grade 3
	Water Reform Programme - Benefits Realisation Strategy	£9,837	20/01/2006	18/01/2006	Grade 6
	Development of policy for delivery of New NI Legislation	£64,392	01/04/2006	05/09/2000	Grade 5
	Review of timing of software issues for Smartpass	£913	12/07/2006	11/07/2006	Deputy Principal

Year	Contract Name	Cost of Contract	When work commenced	When approval was granted	Grade of officer who approved the STA
2008/09	DRD Written Communications Project	£10,000	03/09/2008	09/05/2008	Grade 5
	Legal Advice - NIW personnel issues	£9,883	24/04/2008	24/04/2008	Permanent Secretary
	Water & Sewerage Governance Stakeholders Workshops	£15,899	05/06/2008	24/04/2008	Permanent Secretary
	Rathlin Ferry – procurement investigation	£19,110	30/09/2008	24/07/2008	Permanent Secretary
2009/10	NIW Impairment Review	£9,750	22/12/2009	12/11/2009	Permanent Secretary
	Review of Board effectiveness	£9,789	December 2009	14/10/2009	Permanent Secretary
	Updated Employment Data for Business Land Need	£5,000	05/05/2009	10/04/2009	Permanent Secretary
	Independent Review of NIW Procurement Procedures	£48,881	25/01/2010	20/01/2010	Permanent Secretary
	Belfast Rapid Transit Project - Review of Strategic Outline Case	£13,895	01/04/2009	31/03/2009	Permanent Secretary

APPENDIX B**DRD CORE BUSINESS AREAS - CONTRACT EXTENSIONS**

Year	Contract Name	Cost of Contract Extension	When work commenced on the Extension	When approval was granted	Grade of officer who approved the Contract Extension
2005/06	Legal advice on City of Derry Airport – State Aid application	£2,135	09/09/2005	01/09/2005	Grade 5
2006/07	-	-	-	-	-
2007/08	Update to the 2003 Retail Study	£1,315	02/08/2007	01/08/2007	Grade 3
	Rapid Transit	£106,000	09/08/2007	22/05/2007 29/05/2007	Grade 5 Minister *
2008/09	Policy for New NI Legislation	£50,000	19/11/2008	08/07/2008	Permanent Secretary
	Outline Business Case for Public Transport Reform	£12,500	Jan 2009	22/05/2008	Permanent Secretary
2009/10	Training Plan Manager	£2,339	05/08/2009	05/08/2009	Grade 5
	Regional Transport Strategy Critical Friend	£3,177	08/03/2010	08/03/2010	Grade 5

* Minister's approval is required for contracts over £75,000 that relate to the use of professional services

APPENDIX C**ROADS SERVICE – SINGLE TENDER ACTIONS**

Year	Contract Name	Cost of the Contract	When work commenced	When approval was granted	Grade of officer who approved
2005/06	Advice to Roads Service Board on Review of Public Administration	£10,000	Jan 2006	19/01/2006	Chief Executive
	Development of Business Case and Economic Appraisal for Moving Traffic Offences	£20,000	Feb 2006	25/01/2006	Chief Executive
2006/07	-	-	-	-	-

Year	Contract Name	Cost of the Contract	When work commenced	When approval was granted	Grade of officer who approved
2007/08	Northern Ireland Strategic Transport Model - Growth Factors	£2,025	May 2007	30/04/2007	Chief Executive
2008/09	-	-	-	-	-
2009/10	-	-	-	-	-

APPENDIX D**ROADS SERVICE - CONTRACT EXTENSIONS**

YEAR	Contract Name	Cost of the Contract	When work commenced	When approval was granted	Grade of officer who approved
2005/06	-	-	-	-	-
2006/07	-	-	-	-	-
2007/08	Provision of specialist legal advice	£547,245	June 2007	Not yet available*	Not yet available*
2008/09	-	-	-	-	-
2009/10	Term Contract for Maintenance and Improvement of Street Lighting	£11,500,000	Aug 2009	Various dates from 20/08/09 to 18/05/10	Divisional Roads Managers
	Term Contract for Maintenance and Improvement of Structures	£2,600,000	Dec 2009	Various dates from 8-17/12/2009 and 17-21/05/2010	Divisional Roads Managers

* Roads Service has advised that work is ongoing to confirm the position with regard to the provision of specialist legal advice.

NI Water: Chief Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the business interests of NI Water's Chief Executive in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1937/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a list of its Chief Executive's former Directorships is set out in the table below. The Chief Executive is currently a Director of Northern Ireland Water Limited.

Type	Appointed To	Appointed	Resigned
Director	Energy Networks Association Limited	01/01/2008	22/07/2009
Director	Fleet Solutions (Ireland) Limited	13/06/2002	26/11/2003
Director	MacKenzie Farming Limited	15/04/1997	12/05/2008
Director	NIE Connect Limited	20/01/2003	14/04/2006
Director	NIE Enterprises Limited	29/02/2008	07/07/2009
Director	NIE Generation Limited	29/02/2008	07/07/2009
Director	NIE Limited	16/12/2008	07/07/2009
Director	NIE Power Limited	29/02/2008	07/07/2009
Director	NIE Powerteam Limited	18/10/2000	07/07/2009
Director	Northern Ireland Electricity plc	27/03/2006	07/07/2009
Director	Powerteam Electrical Services (UK) Limited	08/11/2004	07/07/2009
Director	Powerteam Electrical Services Limited	19/12/2003	07/07/2009
Director	SONI Limited	01/04/2006	11/03/2009
Director	Viridian Group Limited	02/03/2006	07/07/2009

NI Water: Chief Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any business involvement NI Water's Chief Executive has with other utility companies in Northern Ireland (i) currently; and (ii) in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1938/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my response to AQW 1937/11 that Northern Ireland Water's Chief Executive does not have any current business involvement with other utility companies in the North and which contains details of his previous involvement with Northern Ireland Electricity.

Footpath or Walkway on Glenavy Road

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to connecting Crumlin and Glenavy via a footpath or walkway on the Glenavy Road; and the estimated cost of undertaking such a project.

(AQW 1942/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a footway scheme, to link the existing footway on Crumlin Road, Glenavy to The Beeches development in Crumlin (approximately 2km), has met the criteria to progress to a more detailed appraisal.

This proposal has been added to a list of similar schemes in the Antrim Borough Council area which will be developed and prioritised in accordance with current policy and procedures.

There are a number of issues that will have to be dealt with before the scheme can be progressed to the procurement stage. For example, gaining approval at the various stages in the development process, the availability of resources through the normal budgetary process, as well as other important considerations when taking forward such a scheme, such as the successful procurement of the necessary lands and facilitating the existing service providers within the scheme.

As this proposal is very much at a preliminary stage, a detailed cost estimate has not yet been prepared.

Enterprise Train Service

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development why WIFI internet access is not available on the Enterprise train service.

(AQW 1971/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Enterprise trains have been in service for in excess of 14 years and at the time they were supplied neither at-seat power points or internet access were identified or specified as a customer requirement. However, Translink is currently preparing a Business Case to consider the provision of WiFi on Enterprise. As with any proposal, this will be subject to economic appraisal and availability of funding in due course. It will also be subject to discussion with Irish Rail in light of existing cost and revenue sharing arrangements.

Enterprise Train Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development how much revenue has been lost on the Enterprise rail service due to terrorist activity this year and how this affects the viability of the service.

(AQW 1992/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Railways estimate a reduction of 2.3% as the percentage down in passenger numbers for Enterprise as result of security alerts. This equates to approximately 11,000 lost passengers. Using average fare per journey this represents a revenue loss of in excess of £80k for the first seven periods of 2010/11. The total cross border revenue on the Enterprise for 2009/10 was £5.03m.

Although the current situation is a matter of concern, the viability of the service is not at risk.

West Circular Crescent, Belfast

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider a road widening scheme for West Circular Crescent, Belfast.

(AQW 1994/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that West Circular Crescent is a cul-de-sac and not a through route and, therefore, traffic progression is not a significant problem. An examination of the recorded injury collision history for this location did not reveal any incidents within the last four years. In addition, widening the carriageway at this location would require a significant amount of work to be undertaken due to the slope of the verge and the existing steps in the vicinity. Taking these factors into consideration, it would not be practicable to widen the carriageway.

In the circumstances, Roads Service has no proposals to widen the carriageway.

Efficiency Savings

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to what extent he intends to prioritise efficiency savings over cuts in preparation for the next Budget.

(AQW 2012/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Once the level of Budget 2010 savings for DRD has been agreed by the Executive, my Department will prioritise savings proposals through an impact assessment process which will include equality considerations.

A5 Western Transport Corridor

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how much has been spent, to date, on the proposed A5 Western Transport Corridor and (ii) how much of this expenditure has come from (a) his Department; and (b) the Irish Government.

(AQW 2033/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has, to date, made payments totalling £30.077 million in respect of the A5 dualling project. The amount received to date from the Irish Government is £7.957 million. A further £11 million is due following the achievement of the third key milestone last week, this being, the publication of draft orders and Environmental Statement for the scheme.

Portavoe Reservoir

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) any plans in place to sell Portavoe Reservoir; and (ii) any plans in place to sell other reservoirs, including proposed timescales.

(AQW 2035/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that Portavoe Reservoir is out of service and in the process of being declared 'no longer required for future use'. The proposed timescale for the disposal of the reservoir is 2011/12. As part of its Estate Management Plan, NIW proposes to declare a number of other reservoirs as 'no longer required for future use' and to offer them for sale over an extended period through to 2016/17. The disposal of all of the reservoirs will be carried out in accordance with NIW's Asset Disposal Policy.

Sale of Reservoirs

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of (i) the total value of the proposed sales of reservoirs; and (ii) whether the sales of reservoirs represents value for money given current land values.

(AQW 2037/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the value of its sites is considered commercially sensitive as disclosure of information could compromise its ability to obtain best price for the assets. Under the conditions of its licence NIW must, before it considers placing protected land on the open market, obtain professional advice from its Estate Professional Advisor (presently BTW Shiells) on the potential proceeds that can be expected from any sale.

NIW holds a book value for each site and will not normally dispose of any of them that are valued at, or over, £20,000 for less than the book value. However, it has been agreed with the NI Authority for Utilities Regulation that for some sites valued under £20,000, NIW may accept less than the book value if the cost of maintaining or clearing the site exceeds the actual value.

While NIW seeks to limit its land holdings to the minimum required for the performance of its statutory duties, it will not dispose of any land or property where an unacceptable loss is likely to be incurred.

Portavoe Reservoir

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the departments and organisations that have been consulted in relation to the future of Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 2038/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has not consulted with any external bodies about its plans for the disposal of Portavoe Reservoir. This is in line with its current Disposal Policy which only requires it to consult with the Department of the Environment if the site for disposal is in a National Park, area of outstanding natural beauty or special scientific interest.

However, Ards Borough Council and North Down Borough Council have written to NIW enquiring about its plans for Portavoe Reservoir and NIW has undertaken to notify them prior to placing it on the open market.

Engineering Staff: Translink Depots

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1517/11, to provide a religious breakdown of current staff within the engineering section in Translink, broken down by depot.
(AQW 2057/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have advised that it is unable to provide a religious breakdown of current staff within their engineering section, broken down by depot, in order to protect the identity of individual staff members at certain locations.

Ulsterbus: Public Subsidy

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development, for the last available financial year, to detail the average public subsidy per Ulsterbus passenger journey expressed (i) in monetary terms; and (ii) as a percentage of the average cost of a journey.

(AQW 2073/11)

Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) For the last financial year, 2009/10 the average public subsidy per Ulsterbus passenger journey is assessed at 47 pence per journey.
- (ii) For the last financial year, 2009/10 the average public subsidy per Ulsterbus passenger journey is assessed at 22% of the average cost of a journey.

The average public subsidy per passenger journey is derived from revenue and capital subsidy figures and Ulsterbus passenger journeys for 2009/10 including those travelling on concessionary fares and school pupils.

The subsidy figures used in the calculation are those for 2009/10 as supplied in the table for AQW 2074/11.

Ulsterbus: Public Subsidy

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what the total public subsidy to Ulsterbus has been in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2074/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The following table sets out the total public subsidy for Ulsterbus over the last 5 financial years.

Capital Grants paid to Ulsterbus are translated into a subsidy figure based on grant released in the Ulsterbus accounts. Revenue grant spend includes Fuel Duty Rebate grant on stage carriage bus services and assistance with NILGOSC employer pension contributions. Earlier years include bus route subsidy which was withdrawn after 2007/08.

Year	Total (£'000s)
2005/06	£10,564
2006/07	£15,229
2007/08	£17,961
2008/09	£18,131
2009/10	£19,568

Repeated Flooding in Areas with Poor Drainage Systems

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is being taken to prevent repeated flooding in areas with poor drainage systems.

(AQW 2075/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Responsibility for the drainage infrastructure is shared between my Department's Roads Service, Northern Ireland Water (NIW), and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency. All three agencies have formulated procedures for liaison and co-ordination of the emergency planning and response to flooding. This has resulted in the production of Best Practice Guidelines and a Flooding Hotspots register.

The combined Flooding Hotspots register is a list of key flooding locations across the North and identifies, for each location, the agency which should take the lead in the event of flooding. This register is continually updated, as new locations are reported, or when problem locations are rectified.

In addition to the Hotspots register, Roads Service also identifies areas which are regularly affected by flooding and prepares work programmes to undertake remedial measures. These work programmes are then completed on a priority basis.

However, I should explain that flooding problems at various locations are not always easy to resolve, as remedial work may be prohibitively expensive, or the solution may not be immediately obvious and may require further investigation or consultation with other Departments, or adjacent landowners.

Cost of Translating and Publishing Documents in Irish

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of (i) translating; and (ii) publishing all documents associated with his Department in Irish in each of the last four years.

(AQW 2080/11)

Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) My Department has spent the following amounts on translating documents into Irish in the four years, 2007-2008 to date:

Year	Irish £s
2007-2008	439
2008-2009	3458
2009-2010	3071
2010-2011	1273
Total:	£8241

- (ii) My Department has spent the following amounts on publishing documents in Irish in the four years, 2007-2008 to date:

Year	Irish £s
2007-2008	0
2008-2009	2479
2009-2010	3910
2010-2011	2221
Total:	£8610

Documents Translated from English into Irish

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the documents published by his Department in each of the last four years that have been translated from English into Irish.

(AQW 2083/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department has published the following documents which have been translated from English into Irish in the four years, 2007/2008 to date:

2007-2008	Document
26/04/07	Ministerial Stationery
10/05/07	Minister's Response Letter
28/08/07	Wording on Road Signs
06/09/07	Roads Service Acknowledgement Letter
12/09/07	Roads Service Response Letter
10/10/07	Minister's Response Letter
29/10/07	Minister's Response Letter
27/11/07	Minister's Foreword to Island of Ireland Atlas
25/02/08	Minister's Response Letter
3/03/08	Minister's Response Letter
05/03/08	Press Advert Headlines

2008-2009	Document
26/03/08	Paragraph on Irish Signage - Minister
17/04/08	Response Letter from Minister
18/04/08	Water Policy Unit Advert Heading
23/04/08	Roads Service Advert Headlines
23/04/08	Blue Badge Application Form
27/04/08	Minister's Foreword to Corporate & Business Plan
28/04/08	Minister's Foreword to Regional Development Strategy Review
02/05/08	Brochure Headlines
02/05/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
06/05/08	Roads Service Advert Headlines
07/05/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
08/05/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
12/05/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
08/05/08	Roads Service Advert Headlines
13/05/08	Roads Service Advert Headlines
15/05/08	Response Letter from Central Management Branch

2008-2009	Document
15/05/08	Public Transport Headline
21/05/08	Departmental Code of Courtesy
21/05/08	Public Transport Headline
30/05/08	60+ SmartPass Application Form
03/06/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
10/06/08	Door-2-Door Bus Service Advert
10/06/08	Roads Service Customer Charter Leaflet
17/06/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
20/06/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
20/06/08	Consultation Advert for Regional Development Strategy Review
20/06/08	60+ SmartPass Advertisement
26/06/08	60+ SmartPass Information Leaflet
26/06/08	Roads Service Advert Headlines
02/07/08	Consultation Advert for Regional Development Strategy Review - Additional text
04/07/08	Text for Departmental Multilingual Website Area
07/07/08	Roads Service Leaflet to Residents
08/07/08	Ministerial Document
09/07/08	60+ SmartPass Advert Headline
18/07/08	Roads Service Leaflet to Residents
18/07/08	Advertisement for Independent Board Members
21/07/08	Headline for Water Supply (Water Fittings) Consultation
25/07/08	60+ SmartPass Renewal Form
28/07/08	Central Claims Unit Compensation Forms
29/07/08	Headline Translation, Central Claims Unit
30/07/08	Water Regulations Advert Heading
02/08/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
06/08/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
08/08/08	Headline Translation, Central Claims Unit
29/08/08	Letter to Irish Language Group
11/09/08	Roads Service Advert Headlines
26/09/08	Minister's Foreword to Consultation Document on Harbours Bill
30/09/08	Translation of The On-Street Parking (Amendment No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008
01/10/08	Roads Service Response Letter

2008-2009	Document
09/10/08	Response Letter from Minister
17/10/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
11/11/08	NIW Drinking Water Quality Advertisement
17/11/08	Door-2-Door Transport Information Leaflet
21/11/08	Personnel Advert
24/11/08	Roads Service Advert Headlines
01/12/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
18/12/08	Roads Service Advert Headline
8/01/09	Roads Service Advert Headlines
13/01/09	Roads Service Response Letter
13/01/09	Travelwise Scheme Leaflet Text
14/01/09	Roads Service Advert Headlines
16/01/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
28/01/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
18/02/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
24/02/09	DRD Information Leaflet 'About Us' Text
12/03/09	Minister's Foreword for Ports Consultation
13/03/09	Advertisement for Accessible Transport Strategy Consultation Public Events
13/03/09	Additional Text for DRD Irish Website section
20/03/09	Roads Service Response Letter
24/03/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
30/03/09	Advertisement for Accessible Transport Strategy Consultation Public Events – additional text

2009 - 2010	Document
01/04/09	Public Transport Advert Headline
9/04/09	Minister's Foreword for Corporate and Business Plan 2009
16/04/09	Text for Travelwise Posters, for Schools
16/04/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
21/04/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
20/05/09	'Walk to School Week' – Press article
26/05/09	Accessible Transport Strategy Advert Headline
26/05/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
28/05/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
01/06/09	Additional Text for DRD Irish Website section

2009 - 2010	Document
09/06/09	Minister's Bursary Application Form
15/06/09	Response Letter from Minister
18/06/09	Text for Car Share North-West website
18/06/09	Advertisement text for Rathlin Island Policy Consultation
21/06/09	Roads Service Leaflet to Residents
26/06/09	Response Letter from Minister
10/07/09	Additional Text for Car Share North-West website
22/07/09	Response Letter from Minister
31/07/09	Response Letter from Minister
07/08/09	Car Share North-West Poster
24/08/09	Response Letter from Minister
21/09/09	Minister's Foreword to Ports Master Plan Consultation
06/10/09	Roads Service Advert Headline
06/10/09	SmartPass Application Forms
06/10/09	Codes of Courtesy for Irish
13/10/09	Minister's Foreword for Rapid Transit
12/11/09	Travelwise Response Letter
08/12/09	Public Transport Advert Headline
11/12/09	Updated Text for DRD Irish Website section
15/12/09	Ministerial Foreword for Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Consultation
07/01/10	Warrenpoint Harbour Authority – Board Member Advertisement Text
13/01/10	Accessible Transport Scheme Advert
02/03/10	Rathlin Island Consultation Advert
23/03/10	Minister's foreword to Corporate and Business Plan 2010
25/03/10	Public Transport Reform Advert Headline

2010 - 2011	Document
12/04/10	Regional Planning Response Letter
12/04/10	Public Transport Reform Consultation - response letters to consultees
20/04/10	Travelwise 'Walk to School Week' Scheme - Letters & Poster text, for schools
20/04/10	Public Transport Reform – Response letters to consultees
29/04/10	Response Letter from Minister
05/05/10	Dial-a-Lift leaflet text
06/05/10	Travelwise 'Walk to School Week' text

2010 - 2011	Document
26/05/10	'Walk to School Week', letter from Minister
02/06/10	Text extract and letter re. Public Transport Reform Consultation
14/06/10	Minister press release on Irish Language Event
14/06/10	Response Letter from Minister
02/07/10	Public Transport Advert Headline
20/07/10	Minister's Speech for A1 Road Link Opening Ceremony
07/09/10	Roads Service Advert Headline
01/10/10	Derry Harbour Commissioners Appointment, advertisement text
05/10/10	Ministerial Foreword on Water Mains Connection Subsidy Consultation
22/10/10	Roads Service Response Letter
26/10/10	Ministerial Foreword for Regional Development Strategy Consultation
16/11/10	Travelwise leaflet 'Sharing Space on the Road'

Flooding and Raw Sewage at the Substation in Greenisland

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on alleviating the problem of flooding and raw sewage at the sub-station in Greenisland.

(AQW 2085/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it responded to two reported incidents of flooding at the subway at Northern Ireland Railway's Greenisland Station in November 2010. The initial investigation, carried out on 11 November 2010, revealed that the sewer was blocked by two large stones which were causing it to surcharge. One stone was removed right away but additional equipment was required to remove the second, and this was not completed until the following day. A subsequent inspection of the sewer confirmed that it was clear and flowing freely.

NIW has been unable to determine how the stones entered the sewer and can only assume they were placed there maliciously. The manhole in the subway has been sealed to prevent material of this nature being deposited in future. As a further precaution, investigations of the upstream sewerage system are being undertaken to identify any other action that could be taken to reduce the risk of a recurrence of the flooding.

Water and Sewage Infrastructure in the East Antrim Constituency

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development how much NI Water has spent on the water and sewage infrastructure in the East Antrim constituency in the last three years; and what is the planned spend for 2010/11.

(AQW 2088/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that £6.4 million was invested in water and wastewater infrastructure in the East Antrim Constituency from April 2007 to March 2010. The planned investment for the area during 2010/11 is £3.2 million.

Strengthening the Junction of the Shore Road and Lough Road, Glenavy

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration his Department has given to strengthening the junction of the Shore Road and Lough Road, Glenavy, at Mulholland's Brick and Sand depot; and whether a starting date has been set for this work to commence.

(AQW 2091/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that its works programme includes a scheme to carry out work to strengthen this junction. However, it has not been possible to implement this scheme, to date, due to funding limitations and the existence of other higher priority schemes.

The proposed scheme will take account of the operational needs associated with Mulholland Bros Brick and Sand Ltd which, I understand, operates six days a week and is located at this junction.

Roads Service will work in advance with this company, in an effort to identify an opportunity to implement this work, as soon as the necessary funding becomes available.

Adoption of the Roads and Sewers in Glencraig Manor, Antrim

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain the reasons behind the dispute regarding the adoption of the roads and sewers in Glencraig Manor, Antrim; and to outline how his officials intend to resolve this situation to ensure that adoption of the infrastructure in this development can proceed unhindered.

(AQW 2092/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service and NI Water (NIW) have both advised that they are not aware of any dispute regarding the adoption of roads and sewers in Glencraig Manor.

The roads and street lighting in Glencraig Manor are ready for adoption. However, the developer has not yet submitted as-constructed drawings showing the storm and foul sewer layout. NIW has advised that it informed the developer on 2 February 2010, of the requirement for adoption of the on-site sewers. It is the developer's responsibility to ensure that sewers are constructed to an adoptable standard, and to make a written application to NIW for adoption, when the standard has been met.

Should it become necessary, Roads Service can use the Private Streets legislation to ensure completion of any outstanding work and adoption.

Belfast City Centre: Car Parking Spaces

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development how many private and public car parking spaces are available in the Belfast City centre area.

(AQW 2290/11)

Minister for Regional Development: In October 2009, my Department's Roads Service carried out a survey of publicly available parking in Belfast City centre. It showed that there were approximately 13,900 publicly available on-street and off-street spaces in the city centre core area, as defined in the Department's Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. These spaces were operated by both the private and public sectors.

These figures exclude any private off-street parking, which is frequently provided within business premises. My Department does not currently hold information on this category of parking. However, when the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan was published in 2004, it was estimated that there were approximately 10,000 private off-street parking spaces in the city centre.

Department for Social Development

Breaches of Contract

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what powers his Department has to investigate serious breaches of contract with employees by contractors working for his Department or any of its arms-length bodies or agencies.

(AQW 638/11)

Minister for Social Development (Mr A Attwood): I have met with officials recently to determine where the power of the Department for Social Development begins and ends in relation to alleged breaches of contract with employees by contractors working for the Department or its arms length bodies.

If the Member is referring to a certain TUPE issue, I met with officials and the Departmental Solicitor's Office recently. While the TUPE obligations of a contractor are ultimately for a Tribunal to determine, I have asked officials to consider:

- (a) if TUPE obligations are an implicit term in contracts involving public monies;
- (b) should an explicit TUPE term be incorporated in contracts involving public monies generally; and
- (c) to assess if existing contracts have an explicit TUPE term in particular.

Housing Associations' Chief Executives

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the salaries and other benefits awarded to the chief executives of each of the Housing Associations in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1232/11)

Minister for Social Development: The salary information for the last 5 years from 2005/06 to 2009/10 of the Chief Executive or senior potholder in each of the housing associations is detailed in the attached table. The table also indicates whether the post attracts any other benefits namely employer pension contribution, a car or car allowance and healthcare.

HOUSING ASSOCIATION FINANCIAL RETURNS, 2005 - 2010

Housing Association (Post Held) Chief Executive unless otherwise indicated	Salary 2005/06 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2006/07 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2007/08 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2008/09 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2009/10 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Other Benefits		
						Employer Pension Contribution	Car Allowance or car provided Yes/No	Healthcare
Abbeyfield	10 - 15,000	15 - 20,000	15 - 20,000	40 - 45,000	45 - 50,000	Yes	No	None
Alpha	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	45 - 50,000	45 - 50,000	No	Yes	None
Ark	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	45 - 50,000	45 - 50,000	Yes	Yes	None
Ballynaveigh (Director)	25 - 30,000	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	Yes	Yes	None
Belfast Community	Reply outstanding	Reply outstanding	Reply outstanding	60 - 65,000	60 - 65,000	Yes	No	None
Clanmil	55 - 60,000	60 - 65,000	65 - 70,000	75 - 80,000	80 - 85,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Connswater Homes	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	45 - 50,000	50 - 55,000	60 - 65,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dungannon & District (General Manager)	HA unable to provide.	HA unable to provide.	25 - 30,000	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	Not Stated by HA.	No	None
Filor	25 - 30,000	30 - 35,000	30 - 35,000	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	Yes	No	None
Flax (General Manager)	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	45 - 50,000	Yes	No	None
FOLD	70 - 75,000	75 - 80,000	80 - 85,000	85 - 90,000	85 - 90,000	Yes	Yes	None
Grove General (Manager)	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	Yes	No	None
Habinteg	60 - 65,000	65 - 70,000	65 - 70,000	75 - 80,000	75 - 80,000	Yes	Yes	None
Harmony Homes	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	Yes	No	None

Housing Association (Post Held) Chief Executive unless otherwise indicated	Salary 2005/06 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2006/07 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2007/08 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2008/09 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Salary 2009/10 (£) In band width (£5,000)	Other Benefits		
						Employer Pension Contribution	Car Allowance or car provided Yes/No	Healthcare
HEARTH (Director)	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	Yes	Yes	None
HELM	80 - 85,000	80 - 85,000	85 - 90,000	85 - 90,000	85 - 90,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newington (General Manager)	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Northern Ireland Co- Ownership	70 - 75,000	75 - 80,000	80 - 85,000	85 - 90,000	90 - 95,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Oaklee	70 - 75,000	70 - 75,000	75 - 80,000	85 - 90,000	90 - 95,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Open Door	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	30 - 35,000	45 - 50,000	45 - 50,000	Yes	No	None
Rural	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	45 - 50,000	45 - 50,000	45 - 50,000	Yes	Yes	None
South Ulster (Director)	45 - 50,000	45 - 50,000	50 - 55,000	60 - 65,000	60 - 65,000	Yes	Yes	None
St Matthews	25 - 30,000	30 - 35,000	35 - 40,000	HA in agreement with Connswater Homes	HA in agreement with Connswater Homes	Yes	No	None
Trinity	65 - 70,000	75 - 80,000	85 - 90,000	90 - 95,000	90 - 95,000	Yes	No	Yes
Triangle	Reply outstanding	Reply outstanding	Reply outstanding	50 - 55,000	50 - 55,000	Yes	No	None
Ulidia	65 - 70,000	75 - 80,000	80 - 85,000	85 - 90,000	90 - 95,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wesley	35 - 40,000	35 - 40,000	40 - 45,000	40 - 45,000	35 - 40,000	Yes	Yes	None

Overpayments to Contractors

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development (i) whether his Department has made any overpayments to contractors in each of the last five years; and if so to detail (ii) the goods or services which were overpaid; (iii) the projects to which the overpayments related; (iv) the value of the overpayments; and (v) whether the overpayments were successfully reclaimed from the companies or individuals overpaid.

(AQW 1352/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Department has not recorded any losses relating to unrecovered overpayments in the last five years. Whilst there have been some overpayments arising, for a variety of reasons, these have all been recovered or are in the process of being recovered. The Department has recently completed a major data matching exercise under the National Fraud Initiative which has demonstrated that the Department did not have any 'duplicate payments' to suppliers over the last five years. Duplicate payments are often linked to situations of overpayments. Unfortunately, the Department's systems are not designed to hold central details of any overpayments which have been made and recovered in full. To gather such information manually across a Department of this size would mean a high cost which is deemed disproportionate.

The Department does operate a Purchase Order Processing system which has various checks and balances built in to help avoid overpayments. This on-line facility is provided through the Shared Service Centre, Account NI, which also provides a further layer of checking when payments are issued. In line with central Finance and Personnel guidance, specifically Annex A4.11 of Managing Public Money Northern Ireland relating to overpayments, it is departmental policy to always pursue recovery of overpayments as far as possible.

Development Site at Clondermot in Derry

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his Department's plans for the development site at Clondermot in Derry, following its purchase of the site in January 2009 at a cost of £3.2 million.

(AQW 1694/11)

Minister for Social Development: My Department purchased the Clondermot site in January 2009 to facilitate the implementation of a redevelopment master plan agreed with Derry City Council, the Western Health and Social Care Trust, North West Regional College and the Waterside Development Trust. Unfortunately neither the Western Health and Social Care Trust nor the North West Regional College can proceed with their proposals due to a lack of finance.

The Waterside Development Trust has however now purchased the portion of the site required for its purposes from my Department and will begin construction of an office block in January 2011. When completed in January 2012, this new building will create a high quality site frontage onto the Irish Street entrance and provide purpose built office accommodation for Derry City Council Community Services together with training facilities and Shared Future conference accommodation.

Given the withdrawal of the health and education proposals my Department is currently engaging with Derry City Council to jointly develop an interim solution that will upgrade the existing pitches and provide new changing facilities on site for public use.

I remain committed in the longer term to the development of this site for the benefit of local communities. Of course, if DFP and Executive colleagues do not recognise the job for job, pound for pound benefit of urban renewal and regeneration as happened in the June 2010 monitoring, my ambitions for the site may be prejudiced. I also hope members may make full representations to other Government departments to help resolve the issue.

Award Ceremonies

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how much his Department and its arms-length bodies have spent on (i) attending award ceremonies organised by other parties; and (ii) organising award ceremonies, including the cost of travel to, and tables at, the ceremonies, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1763/11)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the tables below.

(I) ATTENDING AWARD CEREMONIES ORGANISED BY OTHER PARTIES

2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
£3,386	£7,144	£6,803

(II) ORGANISING AWARD CEREMONIES

2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
-	-	£527

For the answer to part (i), the expenditure reflected represents the travel & accommodation costs of an official or officials attending events/ceremonies. The total costs shown included the following related to the Housing Executive:

Year	Event	Cost	Total
2007/08	BITC Regional Recognition	£940.00	£940.00
2008/09	NICVA Link Awards	£120.00	£1060.00
	BITC Regional Recognition	£940.00	
2009/10	BITC Regional Recognition	£862.50	£1253.50
	Irish News Workplace Excellence	£391.00	

Within the Department, the costs of organising ceremonies in 2009-10 shown related to: an Imperial Service Medal award ceremony at Stormont House (for long-serving junior grade civil servants who retired in 2009); and a Chartered Institute of Personnel Directors awards ceremony at the Bangor premises of DMS consultants.

Entering Competitions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how much his Department and its arms-length bodies have spent on entering competitions, including staff time, entry fees and publications in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1764/11)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested on entering competitions is set out in the table below. The costs shown relate to the recent successful bid to have Derry named as the UK City of Culture in 2013.

2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
-	-	£ 30,625

Conferences at Hotels and Conference Centres

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how much his Department and its arms-length bodies have spent on conferences at hotels and conference centres in each of the last three years, broken down by (i) venue hire; (ii) travel; (iii) food and drink; (iv) gifts; (v) publications; (vi) stage sets; (vii) audio visual materials; (viii) PR companies; (ix) speakers; and (x) overnight stays.

(AQW 1765/11)

Minister for Social Development: The information on expenditure on conferences that is available is given in the table below:

EXPENDITURE ON CONFERENCES IN THE LAST 3 YEARS

Expenditure on Conferences Attended by DSD Staff			
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Core	2,685	5,208	3,468
Housing	7,956	14,050	13,573
Child Maintenance & Enforcement Division	0	456	240
Social Security Agency	6,836	447	7,566
Urban Regeneration Group	22,715	11,870	15,766
ILEX	-	-	-
NI Housing Executive	130,247	136,304	128,311
Sub-total	170,439	168,335	168,924
Expenditure on Conferences Hosted by DSD			
Core	0	806	200
Housing	6,559	3,574	12,811
Child Maintenance & Enforcement Division	19,062	2,733	885
Social Security Agency	7,354	0	0
Urban Regeneration Group	6,487	5,995	170
ILEX	-	11,936	19,156
NI Housing Executive	62,280	69,908	31,571
Sub-total	101,742	94,952	64,793
Grand Total	272,181	263,287	233,717

It should be noted that the nature of the Department's business often necessitates consultations with outside bodies and interested stakeholders. It is for this reason that the information on costs has been split between conferences attended and conferences hosted. These "conference" figures include mandatory consultations with key stakeholders in relation to new policies etc and information seminars regarding legislative and policy changes. The detailed information requested is not available from the Department's finance systems at the level requested.

Housing Associations' Chief Executives

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Social Development what is the annual salary of the Chief Executive of each Housing Association that currently receives funding from his Department.

(AQW 1848/11)

Minister for Social Development: The annual salary of the Chief Executive of each Housing Association that currently receives funding from my Department is detailed in the attached table.

CEO ANNUAL SALARIES FROM HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS WHO GET DEPARTMENTAL FUNDING

Housing Association Chief Executive unless otherwise indicated	35,000- 40,000	40,000- 45,000	45,000- 50,000	50,000- 55,000	55,000- 60,000	60,000- 65,000	65,000- 70,000	70,000- 75,000	75,000- 80,000	80,000- 85,000	85,000- 90,000	90,000- 95,000	95,000- 100,000	100,000+
Abbeyfield			1											
Alpha				1										
Apex											1			
Ark			1											
Belfast Community						1								
Clanmil										1				
Connswater						1								
Flax (General Manager)			1											
Fold											1			
Grove (General Manager)		1												
Hearth (Director)		1												
Helm											1			
Newington (General Manager)		1												

Housing Association Chief Executive unless otherwise indicated	35,000- 40,000	40,000- 45,000	45,000- 50,000	50,000- 55,000	55,000- 60,000	60,000- 65,000	65,000- 70,000	70,000- 75,000	75,000- 80,000	80,000- 85,000	85,000- 90,000	90,000- 95,000	95,000- 100,000	100,000+
NI Co-ownership												1		
Oaklee												1		
Open Door			1											
South Ulster (Director)						1								
St Matthews	1													
Triangle				1										
Trinity												1		
Ulidia												1		
Wesley	1													

Housing Executive Staff Salaries

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Social Development how many staff in (i) the Housing Executive; and (ii) Housing Associations currently earn (a) between £50,000 and £100,000; and (b) over £100,000 per annum.

(AQW 1849/11)

Minister for Social Development:

- (i) In the Northern Ireland Housing Executive there are (a) 23 staff earning £50,000 - £100,000 and (b) 2 staff earning over £100,000 per annum.
- (ii) In the 2009/10 financial year 38 Housing Association staff earned between (a) £50,000 and £100,000 and (b) no staff earned over £100,000 per annum.

The Housing Association figures including full remuneration packages (i.e. including Pension, Bonuses) for the same year show that 39 Housing Association staff earned between (a) £50,000 and £100,000 and (b) 7 staff earned over £100,000 per annum*.

Revenue-generating Assets

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to sell revenue-generating assets to offset any capital shortfalls.

(AQW 1858/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Department only has two types of revenue-generating assets, namely the social houses owned by the Housing Executive (a Non-Departmental Public Body of this Department) and the various lands held for urban regeneration purposes owned by the Department. In the current economic climate however, it is proving extremely difficult to sell either of these types of asset. The level of funding for Housing capital expenditure is partially governed by the level of capital receipts generated from house sales under the Housing Executive House Sales Scheme. Under this Scheme, tenants can purchase their properties and a sales target is set each year, but until such properties are sold, they continue to be a revenue-generating asset through their rental income. Similarly, 540 acres of urban regeneration lands that are revenue-generating by way of conacre rental are currently available for sale. However, I am actively seeking and arguing that where there are assets, reserves and other means to address shortfalls, these should be scoped out, consistent with protecting the public interest, and that there are no quick (including private) fixes in securing monies for capital projects.

Housing Executive Properties in the Magherafelt District Council

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the type; and (ii) the cost of renovations carried out in Housing Executive properties in the Magherafelt District Council area in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1996/11)

Minister for Social Development: The tables below detail the programme of maintenance and improvement schemes carried out to Housing Executive properties in the Magherafelt District Council area in each of the last three years.

TABLE 1 - 2007/08

Scheme Type	Cost £
Multi Element Improvement	855,000.00
External Cyclical Maintenance	568,289.00
Kitchens	550,000.00
Cooker installations	45,460.00
Adaptations	242,600.00

TABLE 2 – 2008/09

Scheme Type	Cost £
External Cyclical Maintenance/Structural Works	195,800.00
Heating installation	280,626.00
Adaptations	226,474.00

TABLE 3 – 2009/10

Scheme Type	Cost £
Kitchens	141,549.00
Adaptations	224,990.00

Community-Based Education and Training Provision

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development, if and how, community based education and training provision will be included in his spending plans.

(AQW 2053/11)

Minister for Social Development: Where education and training needs have been highlighted as a priority in Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans my Department will work closely with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to find the most cost effective way to deliver the services required.

Whilst on occasion DSD provide financial support from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund for community based education training initiatives, it is for DEL as the lead Department to take the initiative in the design, procurement and delivery of these services. Neighbourhood Renewal resources could be used to complement that provision.

My Department's Voluntary and Community Unit also fund two programmes from which communities can access community based education if need is established. The programmes are the Community Support Programme and the Areas at Risk pilot programme.

Community-Based Education

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development whether community based education falls within his remit and whether it will be reflected in his spending plans.

(AQW 2054/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is responsible for the provision of adult education and training in both traditional and non-traditional settings.

Providing people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods with the opportunities to acquire the educational qualifications and skills they need to participate in the labour market is an objective of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and in the past Neighbourhood Renewal resources have been used to provide services where needs were not being addressed. Whilst My Department takes the lead in implementing the strategy other government departments have and should work with DSD in advancing the programme.

It is my clear intention to continue funding the Neighbourhood Renewal programme after 2011. I have made substantial budget bids to do so. I am committed to supporting the community and voluntary sector to deliver needed services in these areas. I will also work to ensure that what my Department funds under Neighbourhood Renewal produces value for money and produces results. Of course I will also be encouraging those organisations which my Department funds to be working more creatively and cooperatively.

Community-Based Learning Opportunities

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the extent to which community based learning opportunities, provided by the community sector, address inequality and increase social inclusion in areas of multiple deprivation in Belfast.

(AQW 2056/11)

Minister for Social Development: The most deprived areas of Northern Ireland, including Belfast, are characterised by a range of inter-related social and economic inequalities. Amongst these are lower levels of educational qualifications and skills than the population as a whole. This serves to distance individuals from the labour market and employment resulting in increased levels of poverty and social exclusion.

Interventions designed to remove barriers to employment make a significant contribution to addressing the underlying causes of deprivation and promote social inclusion. Whilst many of these services will be provided through government departments, particularly the Department for Employment and Learning, others are provided by the Community and Voluntary Sector. The sector has a valuable role to play in providing services which enhance, support or complement those provided by statutory bodies - in particular reaching individuals who find it difficult to access statutory provision.

Benefit Fraud

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown of benefit fraud for the last five years by (i) benefit type; and (ii) constituency.

(AQW 2060/11)

Minister for Social Development: The estimated level of benefit fraud, broken down into each of the main benefits, is set out in the attached tables.

Table 1 shows the estimated cost of benefit fraud for benefits administered by the Social Security Agency. Table 2 shows the estimated cost of Housing Benefit fraud. The levels of benefit fraud are shown in terms of losses and also expressed as a percentage of benefit expenditure.

Benefit Fraud figures are derived from statistical estimates and recorded at a Northern Ireland level for each benefit. The figures are therefore not available at constituency level.

TABLE 1

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS (SSA): – ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD.

Benefit	2005			2006			2007			2008			2009		
	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %		Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %		Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %		Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %		Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %	
Income Support	£11.3	2.4		£4.0	0.9		£3.8	0.8		£5.1	1.1		£5.0	1.1	
Jobseekers Allowance	£2.8	3.0		£2.6	3.0		£1.6	2.1		£1.8	2.1		£2.4	1.6	
Disability Living Allowance	£4.4	0.8		£1.1	0.2		£1.2	0.2		£0.0	0.0		£0.0	0.0	
Incapacity Benefit	£3.7	1.2		£3.8	1.2		£3.1	0.9		£3.1	0.9		£7.1	2.2	
Carers Allowance	£5.6	6.7		£5.6	6.7		£1.2	1.4		£1.3	1.4		£1.3	1.4	
State Pension	£0.0	0.0		£0.0	0.0		£0.0	0.0		£0.0	0.0		£0.0	0.0	
State Pension Credit	£0.3	0.1		£0.6	0.2		£1.1	0.3		£1.1	0.3		£1.2	0.3	
Instrument of Payment	£0.5			£0.4			£0.4			£0.2			£0.2		
Total	Total 2005 Benefit Expend £3406m	0.84%		Total 2006 Benefit Expend £3501m	0.5%		Total 2007 Benefit Expend £3630m	0.3%		Total 2008 Benefit Expend £3789m	0.3%		Total 2009 Benefit Expend £4176m	0.4%	

TABLE 2**HOUSING BENEFIT: – ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD.**

2005			2006			2007			2008			2009		
Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Benefit Fraud %
£403	£4.0	1.0	£438.9	£3.3	0.8	£442.3	£2.9	0.6	£467.9	£3.0	0.6	£538.5	£5.0	0.9

Cul-de-sacs Adjacent to Donard Avenue in Newtownards

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any plans, timescale and budget the Housing Executive has for the widening of the cul-de-sacs adjacent to Donard Avenue in Newtownards.

(AQW 2086/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has drawn up proposals to hard landscape the green areas in Lismara Place, one of a number of cul-de-sacs off Donard Avenue, Newtownards and is currently seeking planning approval for these proposals. If this is secured it is hoped to carry out the works by the spring of 2011. The estimated cost of the proposed works is £50,000.

If these measures are successful and dependent on the availability of funding the Housing Executive hopes to carry out similar works within the other cul-de-sacs in the area.

Funding from the Modernisation Fund

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the (i) successful; and (ii) outstanding projects in the Foyle constituency which have applied for funding from the Modernisation Fund which have been (a) awarded contracts; or (b) are awaiting contracts.

(AQW 2094/11)

Minister for Social Development: The table below provides information on successful projects in the Foyle constituency which have been awarded contracts under the Department's Modernisation Fund Capital programme.

Name of Organisation	Amount Awarded
Business in the Community	£300,000
First Housing Aid and Support Services	£46,337
Hillcrest House Family Centre	£78,518
Holywell Trust	£1,418,912
Learmont Community Development Group	£37,597
Little Orchids	£80,820
Newbuildings Community and Environmental Assoc	£59,994
REACH Across	£45,851

The Department commenced 2010/11 with insufficient capital funding to progress regeneration projects. I was successful in securing over £1.8 m of funding for the Modernisation Fund Capital programme. This will enable issue of contracts to Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership (£255,000) and St Columb's Park House (£109,815).

To date, I have spent £8.6 m on the Modernisation Fund including those projects listed in the above table. I have placed bids in the Budget 2010 process to secure funding to complete the commitment of £15 m to the programme, including the one remaining project in Foyle, Disability Action. I am confident that this range of commitments and expenditure will demonstrate again to people in the Foyle constituency the positive impact of DSD initiatives.

Welfare Reform

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the Government's most recent proposals on welfare reform.

(AQW 2105/11)

Minister for Social Development: Many of you will be acutely aware of how I view the draft welfare reforms that have been introduced by Westminster firstly through the emergency budget in June this year and latterly as part of the Comprehensive Spending review. The scale of the reforms and the potential for these to impact adversely here in Northern Ireland prompted me to make a statement in this Assembly only last Tuesday (23rd November). I have repeatedly stated that I am not averse to reform, reform which incentivises individuals to join or re-join the labour market, reforms which protect the vulnerable and ensure the future affordability of our welfare system but I do have concerns about some of the emerging proposals in that very context.

Welfare Reform - Key Milestones:

- June 2010 – Emergency budget in Westminster - introduces changes including a range of changes associated with Housing Benefit reform,
- September 2010 - Assembly pass a motion endorsing the need for welfare reform but stressing the need for Northern Ireland's unique political and social landscape to be taken into consideration within the constraints of 'Parity'
- Further announcements in respect of proposed changes to Housing Benefits and restrictions on Mortgage Interest support announced as part of Chancellor's 'Spending Review' in October in addition to introducing broader welfare reform proposals around Universal Credit, changes to Tax Credits and proposals for DLA
- Coalition Government produces its white paper "Universal Credit: Welfare That Works" in November outlining the need for change and providing further detail on the proposed changes including detail on conditionality and sanctions.
- 23rd November Minister delivers a statement on Welfare Reform to the Assembly - Outline continuing dialogue with Lord Freud, Iain Duncan Smyth and others, intention to bring a 'remedies' paper to the executive and urges Executive colleagues to act to ensure the most vulnerable are protected.

Supported Living Accommodation

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 1745/11, for a breakdown of the type of supported living units available in Magherafelt for people with serious mental health problems.

(AQW 2120/11)

Minister for Social Development: Praxis Care Group provides a Dispersed Supported Housing Scheme in Magherafelt. This is a long term service provided to up to 15 clients with serious mental health problems at 15 different addresses in Magherafelt. The tenants of the properties have a tenancy with Praxis Care Group; the properties are in the main owned by private landlords.

Review of the Social Security Agency

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development (i) whether he plans to carry out a review of the Social Security Agency; and (ii) to detail the time taken to deal with Employment Support Allowance claims.

(AQW 2128/11)

Minister for Social Development:

- (i) I currently do not have plans to carry out a review of the Social Security Agency. The Agency continues to sustain high levels of performance in an environment where there has been a significant increase in the number of people claiming benefits as a consequence of the severe economic downturn and improvements in customer service are being achieved through implementation of an extensive modernisation programme.
- (ii) The average clearance time for an Employment and Support Allowance claim during October was 14.8 days. The year to date average clearance time is 15.2 days, within the target time of 17 days.

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to list all companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for his Department.

(AQW 2132/11)

Minister for Social Development: The companies used by my Department for the delivery of telecommunications are as follows:

- British Telecom PLC
- Cable & Wireless Communication
- Colt Technology Services
- Eircom UK LTD
- NB Data LTD
- Nimans
- Orange
- O2 (UK) LTD
- Quadrant
- Radiocontact LTD
- Rocom LTD
- Sentel Independent LTD
- Telecom Cable Solutions
- Virgin Media Business
- Vodafone LTD

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2133/11)

Minister for Social Development: The table below provides details of all payments made to BT by my Department in each of the last five years. The figures include costs in respect of telephone installation and maintenance, mobile phone rental as well as the cost of calls and lines supplied and other miscellaneous communication costs.

TOTAL PAID TO BT OVER THE PERIOD 2005/06 TO 2009/10 £

2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
£531,858	£460,284	£386,842	£399,231	£261,961

Unfunded Commitments

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 361/11, to detail (i) the location of the 64 unfunded commitments that relate to the Urban Regeneration programme; (ii) when these contractual commitments were made; and (iii) the cost of each unfunded contractual commitment made.

(AQW 2137/11)

Minister for Social Development: I commenced 2010-11 with insufficient funding to bring forward essential regeneration projects. I sought to remedy the position by placing £44.4m of regeneration bids

in the June monitoring round, the Executive failed to recognise the importance of urban regeneration, and only provided a further £10m of funding. I placed a further £5.3m of regeneration bids in the September monitoring round and I only received a further £0.9m from the Executive. As the Executive only provided me with an additional £10.9m of funds for regeneration projects, I decided to proactively reallocate £4.7m from within my Department at the September monitoring round.

In conjunction with the baseline opening budget and the additional funding above, I have secured, in total almost, £25m of funding for regeneration projects in 2010-11 which has ensured that no unfunded projects remain and all have received allocated funds. I attempted to progress £20m of priority projects in this year but the Executive did not release monies to allow me to do so.

As with other Ministers, I await the Executive's agreement on budget allocations for 2011-12 and beyond but I will continue to impress upon Executive colleagues the job for job and pound for pound benefit of urban renewal and regeneration and this should be recognised in Budget 2011-15.

TUPE Regulations: Compliance

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development what procedures are in place to ensure contractors working for his Department, or any of its arms-length bodies, comply with TUPE regulations. **(AQW 2148/11)**

Minister for Social Development: The Department does not currently monitor compliance with TUPE regulations by contractors working for the Department or any arms length bodies. The TUPE regulations provide protections for staff and their trade unions which may be enforced in the Industrial Tribunals or the Courts. The application of TUPE is therefore a matter for contractors and if this can not be resolved by agreement between them, then it is a matter for determination by the Industrial Tribunal or the Courts on application by any effected employees.

However, I have met with officials recently to determine where the power of the Department for Social Development begins and ends in relation to alleged breaches of contract with employees by contractors working for the Department or its arms length bodies. I also met with officials and the Departmental Solicitor's Office recently. While the TUPE obligations of a contractor are ultimately for a Tribunal to determine, I have asked officials to consider:

- (a) if TUPE obligations are an implicit term in contracts involving public monies;
- (b) should an explicit TUPE term be incorporated in contracts involving public monies generally; and
- (c) to assess if existing contracts have an explicit TUPE term in particular.

TUPE Regulations: Obligations

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department issues guidance to companies tendering for contracts with his Department or any of its arms-length bodies in relation to their potential obligations under TUPE regulations. **(AQW 2149/11)**

Minister for Social Development: The Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate tender and manage all major Northern Ireland Civil Service contracts. Similarly the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, as a Centre of Procurement Excellence, tenders and manages its own contracts.

The Housing Executive has advised that it makes Contractors aware at tender stage that TUPE may apply and that they should seek appropriate legal advice regarding this issue. The Housing Executive's Information Memorandum, which is issued at Pre Qualification Questionnaire stage, contains the following paragraph outlining that TUPE may apply to a contract:-

"TUPE regulations may apply to the staff / operatives currently engaged in the delivery of these Contracts. Contractors are required to seek their own advice and include for this in their tenders."

The Housing Executive also ensures that a further reference to TUPE is included within the Instructions to Tenderers at tender stage.

I also met with officials and the Departmental Solicitor's Office recently. While the TUPE obligations of a contractor are ultimately for a Tribunal to determine, I have asked officials to consider:

- (a) if TUPE obligations are an implicit term in contracts involving public monies;
- (b) should an explicit TUPE term be incorporated in contracts involving public monies generally; and
- (c) to assess if existing contracts have an explicit TUPE term in particular.

Employment Support Allowance: Claims

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he has taken to reduce the delays in processing Employment Support Allowance claims which can lead to financial hardship for claimants. **(AQW 2169/11)**

Minister for Social Development: I am not aware that in general there are any delays in processing claims within the Employment and Support Allowance processing centre. The average clearance time for an Employment and Support Allowance claim during October was 14.8 days, and the year to date clearance time is 15.2 days, well within the target of 17 days. The current number of outstanding fresh claims is within the acceptable head of work.

There are occasions when the processing of a claim takes longer than 17 days due to an individual's specific circumstances and the complexity of the benefit. These cases are closely monitored and dealt with as a priority. If a customer advises that they will suffer financial hardship, the Employment and Support Allowance Centre will consider providing interim payments until a full assessment is made.

Employment Support Allowance

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the statement by the Citizens' Advice Bureau that some Employment Support Allowance claimants "have received incomplete, incorrect or misleading advice"; and what steps he has taken to ensure that this situation does not continue.

(AQW 2170/11)

Minister for Social Development: I am aware that Social Security Agency officials met with representatives from Citizens Advice Bureau in September to discuss their report. The meeting was very positive, with Citizens Advice Bureau officials acknowledging that many of the issues highlighted within their report were dated and that there had been significant improvements in the service. My officials in the Social Security Agency have also formally responded to the Social Development Committee following a Citizens Advice Bureau presentation of the reports' findings.

The Employment and Support Allowance benefit is a new and complex social security benefit and the Social Security Agency is committed to ensuring that all of its customers receive a high quality service including accurate and timely advice. The Employment and Support Allowance Centre has in place an extensive Learning and Development Programme, and has introduced an Accuracy Improvement Programme to help all new and existing staff learn from complaints and errors at an individual, team and Centre level. Telephone calls are monitored for accuracy and quality, revised telephony scripts have been introduced, and complex queries are dealt with by a dedicated team. The wording of letters and notifications issued by the Social Security Agency are also being reviewed to ensure they are more accurate and customer friendly.

Vacant Land on the Shankill, Crumlin and Oldpark Roads

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister for Social Development what plans his Department has for the development of vacant land, purchased by the Belfast Regeneration Office, on the Shankill, Crumlin and Oldpark Roads.

(AQW 2181/11)

Minister for Social Development: Parcels of land and buildings at these and other locations were acquired to remove dereliction, stimulate private sector investment and improve the physical environment. My plan is to help regenerate these areas by disposing of such sites for development in line with the Department's priorities. It is well known, however, that current market conditions are limiting the appetite of the private sector for development sites.

Below-Standard Housing in North Belfast

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he will take to address the below standard housing in the Leopold, Rosebank and Columbia Streets in North Belfast.

(AQW 2182/11)

Minister for Social Development: I recently visited some of the homes in these streets and I was shocked at the level of disrepair of houses. In total there are 131 properties across these 3 streets, all owned and managed by Harmony Homes, formerly Woodvale and Shankill Housing Association. Responsibility for this level of disrepair lies entirely with the Housing Association and is one of the reasons why my Department has suspended them from further development until they address the state of their existing homes.

Clanmil Housing Association are working alongside my officials to help Harmony Homes bring forward plans to address this level of unfitness and I understand that work is virtually complete.

Harmony Homes plan to consult directly with their tenants and political representatives in the coming weeks and I have asked to be kept informed of that so I can ensure the Housing Association fulfils its obligations to their tenants.

Village Regeneration Scheme in Belfast

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are facing negative equity and potential bankruptcy as a result of the Village Regeneration Scheme in Belfast.

(AQW 2183/11)

Minister for Social Development: To date the Housing Executive has identified 30 claims from home owners in the Village who are in negative equity. There are still 23 claims to be lodged and as yet we have no information on their specific circumstances.

It is not possible to identify the financial consequences of this on individual home owners or landlords. However you will recall from our recent debate in the Assembly that this is not an issue for my Department alone and I am due to meet with Ministerial Colleagues in the coming weeks to see what further may be done to support these individuals.

Langley Road Estate in Ballynahinch

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development whether replacement double glazing installation in pensioners' homes in the Langley Road Estate in Ballynahinch was stopped so that funds could be diverted to allow similar work to be carried out on homes in other estates in Ballynahinch which are perceived to be Nationalist.

(AQW 2201/11)

Minister for Social Development: There was no question of discrimination on the grounds of religion or community background or of the budget for this scheme being reallocated to other external cyclical maintenance schemes in the area. The Housing Executive has advised me that there was an external cyclical maintenance scheme in the Langley Road area in 2004, which did not include the replacement of windows. The decision not to install double glazed windows during this scheme was made purely as a result of a technical inspection of the properties in question and entirely on the basis of the condition of the windows.

Housing Executive Properties with Economy 7 Heating

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties in (i) East Belfast; and (ii) South Belfast currently use Economy 7 heating.

(AQW 2215/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has advised that they have 447 dwellings in East Belfast and 385 dwellings in South Belfast which have electrical storage heating systems.

Bridge at Alexandra Park and Graingers Mill in Muckamore, Antrim

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 167/10, for an update on the proposals to remove the bridge at Alexandra Park and Graingers Mill in Muckamore, Antrim.

(AQW 2224/11)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has agreed to work with the Rivers Agency on the removal of the bridge at Graingers Mill, Antrim. However, before work on the removal can begin, NI Water is required to re direct a foul sewer pipe which currently traverses the bridge. My Department has been advised that work on this should complete early next year, at which time work will begin on the removal of the bridge.

Housing Executive Maintenance Schemes for the Fern Grove Area of Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any planned Housing Executive maintenance schemes for the Fern Grove area of Bangor.

(AQW 2326/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has advised that a kitchen replacement scheme is programmed for Fern Grove /Bloomfield Place in this financial year. The scheme will consist of 63 dwellings, 50 of which are located in Fern Grove, and has an estimated start date of January 2011.

Housing Benefit for Private Sector Rented Accommodation

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the amount of Housing Benefit that has been paid for private sector rented accommodation in each of the last three years, broken down by Housing Executive district office area.

(AQW 2332/11)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the amount of Housing Benefit paid to applicants living in the private rented sector in each of the last three years, by Housing Executive District Office area:-

District Office	2007/08 (£)	2008/09 (£)	2009/10 (£)
Belfast West	25,355.39	16,168.72	8,790.10
Belfast East	22,030.98	10,397.70	10,361.22
Belfast North	41,110.26	30,429.44	23,933.66
Belfast Shankill	23,943.13	4,895.44	1,520.23
Belfast South	16,804.10	16,717.89	7,903.66
Belfast North Private HB Unit	16,968,750.11	19,836,154.31	23,064,317.31
Belfast South Private HB Unit	10,144,424.88	11,860,956.46	13,872,897.71
Belfast East Private HB Unit	12,861,439.19	14,364,407.16	16,366,547.74
Belfast West Private HB Unit	18,772,815.65	21,981,173.77	25,079,965.19

District Office	2007/08 (£)	2008/09 (£)	2009/10 (£)
Bangor	7,304,767.17	7,889,850.43	9,356,140.06
Newtownards	5,935,646.60	6,938,999.53	8,647,920.67
Castlereagh	3,699,902.36	4,320,622.68	5,219,034.13
Lisburn Antrim Street	4,632,009.84	5,841,900.43	8,074,411.93
Lisburn Dairy Farm	4,090,281.75	4,570,023.75	5,159,200.04
Downpatrick	9,232,342.57	10,321,214.58	12,425,076.23
Banbridge	3,894,206.34	4,518,002.40	5,523,588.72
Newry	14,210,653.52	15,359,312.60	18,263,620.78
Armagh	5,772,945.26	6,509,505.20	7,864,921.32
Lurgan	7,942,638.28	9,307,097.11	11,145,827.37
Portadown	5,227,649.82	5,980,792.23	6,839,374.60
Dungannon	5,302,587.57	6,291,624.24	7,666,119.94
Fermanagh	5,397,022.65	6,383,524.98	8,011,147.86
Ballymena	5,942,969.73	6,681,072.29	8,265,920.13
Antrim	3,242,596.18	3,926,974.66	5,214,808.98
Newtownabbey 1	3,104,870.01	3,530,567.97	4,418,052.96
Newtownabbey 2	3,529,466.17	3,968,026.11	4,966,909.57
Carrickfergus	3,776,579.93	4,356,665.69	5,318,376.82
Larne	3,786,108.46	4,423,536.40	5,622,726.17
Ballycastle	2,309,342.23	2,590,143.78	3,085,699.14
Ballymoney	2,771,130.70	3,139,508.29	4,116,530.89
Coleraine	6,670,990.27	7,779,544.66	9,625,546.88
Waterloo Place	10,866,108.49	12,253,443.56	13,821,762.41
Waterside	10,342,879.61	11,036,180.06	12,512,335.03
Collon Terrace	8,498,256.95	9,261,051.37	10,325,137.70
Limavady	3,700,221.90	4,581,375.44	6,129,660.25
Magherafelt	2,870,205.75	3,411,941.70	4,665,978.85
Strabane	6,330,220.53	7,267,635.13	9,055,722.19
Omagh	6,864,601.26	7,823,854.59	9,226,081.36
Cookstown	3,169,215.01	3,911,418.93	5,082,475.26

Note: The Housing Executive currently reports Housing Benefit expenditure on the basis of public sector (NIHE) tenants and private sector (non NIHE tenants). The private sector expenditure figure therefore includes expenditure for Housing Association related housing benefit claims.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Assembly Staff

Mr C Boylan asked the Assembly Commission how many people were employed in the Assembly prior to suspension in October 2002.

(AQW 2070/11)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr P Ramsey): Records for the number of people employed by the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission are based on the published Resource Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2003. The Accounts report that the average monthly number of staff employed in the Assembly during 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003 was 313.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 3 December 2010

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Investigation by Sir Jon Shortridge

Mr P McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the time-frame for the investigation by Sir Jon Shortridge.

(AQW 1947/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): The investigation by Sir Jon Shortridge has been completed. His report has been received and is being considered by the Head of the NI Civil Service.

Women's Groups: Interim Review of Funding

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Interim Review of Funding for Women's Groups was completed; and when a report will be published.

(AQW 2204/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: A draft report is in the final stages of preparation, and it is hoped that recommendations will be submitted to us for consideration before the end of the year.

Consultation on the Draft Budget and Capital Programme

Ms S Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether consultation on the Draft Budget and Capital Programme will be led by the Executive; and how the Executive intends to carry out the consultation.

(AQW 2216/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Following the agreement of the Executive, the Minister of Finance and Personnel will conduct a consultation on its behalf on a draft budget. The precise arrangements for the consultation process have not yet been determined.

Executive's New Website

Mr T Burns asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost to date of (i) creating; and (ii) maintaining the Executive's new website.

(AQW 2223/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: This is not a new website but a redesign of the existing Northern Ireland Executive site: www.northernireland.gov.uk/ .

All work on the redesign was undertaken internally by the Web & Design team in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) under the direction of the Executive Information Service (EIS). No external agencies or consultants were used.

The website's content continues to be managed by EIS, with technical support provided by Web Hosting in DFP and while it is not possible to disaggregate internal charges, no additional costs are incurred for maintaining the site.

The new design was undertaken to exploit the growing influence of new media and to improve an important channel for government communication.

Local Government Boundaries Commissioner

Mr R Beggs asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister on what grounds were the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and Assistant Commissioners removed from the list of public appointments to be regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.[R]
(AQW 2258/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: At no time were the posts of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner or Assistant Local Government Boundaries Commissioners removed from the list of public appointments to be regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any of their Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.
(AQW 2274/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Guidance issued in July 2010 by the Department of Finance and Personnel to all departments in anticipation of the Budget 2010 process, set out the requirement for high-level equality impact assessments in terms of both spending proposals and savings measures.

Consequently, our Department's Spending Review proposals have been subject to high-level equality impact assessments. This process includes an assessment of the impact of the spending proposals on issues of equality, good relations, poverty, social inclusion and sustainable development.

Staff Salaries

Mr R Beggs asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 667/11, to detail the seven positions within their Department or its arms-length bodies that attract salaries of over £100,000 per annum.
(AQW 2381/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The seven positions within our arms length bodies that attracted salaries of over £100,000 per annum as noted in AQW 667/11 are set out below.

Position	Arms Length Body
Acting CE/COO	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Legal Director	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Programme Director	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Head of iAMU	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Strategic Advisor	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Strategic Advisor	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Chief Executive Officer	Illex Urban Regeneration Company Ltd

However, it should be noted that although this information was correct at the time of publishing our answer to AQW 667, one of the Strategic Advisors noted in this table has now left the Strategic

Investment Board. This means that there are now six positions within our Department's arms length bodies that attract salaries of greater than £100,000 per annum.

The Ilex CEO is on secondment from the Department for Employment and Learning and her salary is jointly funded by OFMDFM and the Department for Social Development.

Budget Review Group

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the need for the Executive to produce a budget, for an update on the progress of the Budget Review Group.

(AQW 2478/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Budget Review Group has met six times to date and is continuing to meet. The Review Group has discussed a number of important cross-cutting strategic issues, including public sector pay constraint, Capital investment plans, asset management, potential additional revenue raising options, additional means of leveraging funds and measures to reduce bureaucracy. These discussions are continuing as part of developing a Budget.

Film and Television Production

Mr W Clarke asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the benefits to the local economy from television and film production deals brought about by their visits to the USA.

(AQO 602/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Paint Hall in Belfast's Titanic Quarter has an important role in the future of television and film production in Northern Ireland.

Building a strong working relationship with global media organisations has been one of the key objectives of our visits to the US and these visits have produced real results.

The film *Your Highness* returned a direct spend to the local economy of approximately £12m for an investment of some £1.15m.

Game of Thrones 'Series 1' is anticipated to return a direct spend to the local economy of approximately £17m for an investment of £1.6m.

If series 1 proves successful then the potential exists for production to continue on up to seven series at the Paint Hall, which could equate to a total direct spend in the local economy of an estimated £140m for an investment of some £11m.

We understand a decision by HBO to commission the second series of Game of Thrones could be made as early as April 2011.

We have had local success too. The second series of *Sesame Tree* returned to our screens last week. This was made for and by people from Northern Ireland and has been taken by CBeebies for broadcast to the whole of the UK. This is an excellent achievement by the local production company Sixteen South Television.

Clearly global entertainment organisations like HBO, Universal and the others we met feel that Northern Ireland has something to offer. A significant attraction is undoubtedly the magnificent facility of the Paint Hall.

We recently visited the set of HBO's Game of Thrones, which further highlighted to us the opportunities that the Paint Hall presents to film and TV producers as one of the largest studio spaces in Europe.

The recent investments by HBO's and Universal are helping not only to grow the creative industries here, but also, our local economy.

Public Appointments

Mr R Beggs asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether all senior appointments to public bodies are subject to approval by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

(AQO 607/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We can confirm that no senior appointments to public bodies are subject to approval by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Border Areas: Efficiencies

Mr G McHugh asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have held with Executive Departments and the Irish Government about improving efficiencies in the border areas.

(AQO 608/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Executive Departments have discussed a range of issues with the Irish Government relating to efficiencies in the border areas and within the NSMC including health and emergency services, cross-border transport and roads and school transport.

Ministers meeting in the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) have approved the 2010 Business Plans for each of the North South Implementation Bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd (the Bodies). These have included minimum 3% cash releasing efficiency savings.

The 2011-2013 Corporate Plans and 2011 Business Plans and budgets for each of the Bodies are being finalised for approval at future NSMC meetings. These plans will include a continuation of efficiency savings of 3% in 2011 cumulating to 9% over the period 2012 and 2013.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr P Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps have been taken by the Planning Appeals Commission to manage its resources more efficiently to allow future public inquiries on Article 31 applications to be dealt with concurrently.

(AQO 609/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent Tribunal which operates at arms length from Government and exercises its functions independently of our Department.

While OFMDFM holds sponsorship responsibility for the Commission and provides financial and administrative support, the Chief Commissioner is responsible for the day to day operation of the Commission and for deployment of its resources to meet the prevailing workload. However, in recognition of the challenges and pressures facing the Commission, we made a commitment through PSA 21 to increase its resources.

We allocated a significant additional budget to the Commission over the three-year period 2008 to 2011 to deliver potential increased spending power by around £2 million over the three years.

This additional funding has enabled us to appoint a further 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 3,000 in 2007 to a figure of 409 at the end of October 2010.

However, the Commission's referred workload has also increased significantly over the past 2 years with a large number of major planning proposals being referred to it for public inquiry.

In addition, the Commission is currently engaged in the very resource intensive process of considering objections to a number of draft development plans.

Recently the Chief Commissioner sought approval to widening the remit of three suitably qualified and experienced Panel Commissioners to enable them to undertake public inquiry work and we have agreed to this.

This, together with the availability of full-time Commissioners when reports on draft development plans are completed, will allow the Commission to process a number of Article 31 proposals in early 2011.

Arm's-length Bodies

Mr T Gallagher asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the proposal to abolish a number of quangos in the rest of the United Kingdom, whether they plan to review the number and remit of departmental arms-length bodies.

(AQO 610/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Publicly funded bodies play an important role in the delivery of public services but they need to be as efficient as possible and continuously examine how they can operate most effectively and economically. This is even more important in times of budgetary constraint.

The Ministerial Budget Review Group is currently looking at the matter of arm's length bodies or so-called 'quangos' as part of its work. This includes looking carefully at the options to realise savings in our public bodies without a loss of essential public services. Part of this is about looking at the scope for greater use of shared services and shared facilities across public bodies. All public bodies should already be seriously exploring these options as part of achieving the reductions in their cost base that will have to happen over the next few years.

In terms of what is happening in the rest of the UK, the Westminster Coalition Government has put forward proposals for the reform of several hundred public bodies in a Public Bodies Bill which was introduced into the UK Parliament on 28 October.

We are currently consulting all Northern Ireland departments about the nature of their involvement with the bodies included in the Public Bodies Bill to enable us to make a comprehensive assessment of the implications for this Administration of their proposals and the need for the legislative consent of the Assembly to the changes proposed.

After-school Club: Ballymacarrett

Mr C Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether funding for the Ballymacarrett Centre's after schools club has been awarded up to March 2011.

(AQO 611/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Whilst after school childcare is not a direct responsibility of OFMDFM, we are pleased to confirm that we have recently secured additional funding to enable this after school club to continue until March 2011.

You will appreciate how difficult this task has been, particularly in the current economic climate and we are therefore pleased to have found a way forward.

Government: Revenue

Ms M Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what powers the Executive has at present to raise revenue.

(AQO 613/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive has limited powers at this time to raise revenue. Schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 lists matters which are excepted and, therefore, generally outside the competence of the NI Assembly and the Executive.

Paragraph 9 addresses revenue raising taxes and duties.

Over 90% of the Executive's resources are made available from Westminster. Of the revenues raised locally, the regional rate is the only significant item amounting to around 3% of the total managed expenditure in 2009/10.

Community and Race Relations: Funding

Mr A Easton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much funding was awarded in the last financial year to groups involved in the promotion of community and race relations.

(AQO 614/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM funding for Community Relations for 2009/10 totalled £8,972,739. This includes support for the District Councils Community Relations Programme, direct funding to voluntary and community groups, sponsorship for the Community Relations Council's good relations work, technical transfers to other departments for intervention work and support for the former Community Empowerment Partnerships through the North Belfast programme.

In the 2009/10 financial year, OFMDFM provided funding for the promotion of race relations totalling £1,050,115 through the Minority Ethnic Development Fund.

North/South Ministerial Council: Efficiencies

Mr D Hilditch asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the economic downturn, whether discussions have taken place in the North/South Ministerial Council regarding efficiencies.

(AQO 615/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Executive Departments have discussed a range of issues with the Irish Government relating to efficiencies in the border areas and within the NSMC including health and emergency services, cross-border transport and roads and school transport.

Ministers meeting in the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) have approved the 2010 Business Plans for each of the North South Implementation Bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd (the Bodies). These have included minimum 3% cash releasing efficiency savings.

The 2011-2013 Corporate Plans and 2011 Business Plans and budgets for each of the Bodies are being finalised for approval at future NSMC meetings. These plans will include a continuation of efficiency savings of 3% in 2011 cumulating to 9% over the period 2012 and 2013.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Documents Translated from English into Irish

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the documents published by her Department in each of the last four years that have been translated from English into Irish.

(AQW 2103/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew):

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Year to date
DARD Language Policy for Irish and Ulster Scots	Programme of Events for Balmoral Show	Programme of Events for Balmoral Show	Programme of Events for Balmoral Show	Foreword to Children and Young People's Action Plan

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Year to date
Translation of “Our Customer Service Standards” (booklet) and “Our Complaints Procedure” (Leaflet)	Equality pages of DARD internet	Foreword to ECNI Progress Report 2007/08	Foreword to ECNI Progress Report 2008/9	Foreword to ECNI Progress Report 2009/10
		2009/10 DARD Business Plan – translated into Irish in 08/09 and Plan published in 09/10.	Foreword to Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 Information Pack, Growing Opportunities Together	
			Foreword to Rural Childcare Programme Application Pack	
			Foreword to DARD Evidence & Innovation Strategy 2009-2013 Published: July 2009	
			2010/11 DARD Business Plan – translated into Irish in 09/10 and Plan published in 10/11	
			Single Farm Payments – Review of Decisions Procedures 2010 Single Application Form Booklet -Foreword	
			Foreword/ Executive Summary of the EQIA on the Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework	

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Year to date
			Foreword – Consultation on proposals for changes to dog control legislation	
			Foreword to the Forest Recreation and Social Use Strategy	

We have not included in this response, general response letters which were translated into Irish or adverts. Irish translations of Ministerial Forewords and Executive summaries to main documents have been included.

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to her Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2130/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The costs incurred in each of the last five financial years are outlined in the table below.

Financial Year	Total Costs of Bt Calls and Lines
2005/06	£670,080
2006/07	£650,895
2007/08	£526,611
2008/09	£493,281
2009/10	£499,341

Delivery of Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list all the companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for her Department.

(AQW 2131/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The main providers of telecommunications services to both DARD and NICS are BT and Eircom. The full list of providers is as follows:

British Telecom (BT)
Cable & Wireless
Eircom
O2
Orange
Vodafone

£45m Export Deal Between the UK and China

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether pig breeders and producers will benefit from the recently signed £45m export deal between the UK and China.

(AQW 2141/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am very hopeful that pig breeders and producers here will be able to benefit from the recently agreed export trade deal with China. The re-opening of this market is very welcome.

Arrangements are in place to allow farmers here to take advantage of the opportunity. The stringent testing of stock prior to exportation and the transportation costs involved will be challenging but a strong export market allows breeders to develop and exploit this business opportunity.

Formal agreement has also been reached and a protocol signed on export health certification to allow a start to be made on the export of pigmeat to China. Discussions are ongoing and there is optimism that this resumption of trade will create further opportunities for local breeders and producers.

Measure 341 of the EU Rural Development Programme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the aims and benefits of Measure 341 of the EU Rural Development Programme; and why she did not follow her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in bidding for funding under this measure, when submitting the original bid.

(AQW 2142/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The decision to implement the Axis 3 Quality of Life Measures through the Axis 4 methodology enabled the draw down by Local Action Groups of a generous Administration provision of up to 20%. In light of that my Department did not include Measure 341 in its Programme. Rather it made administration funds available to Council Clusters for animation of their areas and for the formation and competitive selection of Local Action Groups to develop local development strategies.

In addition my Department has provided a range of training and development activities for Local Action Groups to build the capacity of members and improve management of the Axis

The shape and delivery of the rural development programme in the north reflects the different problems faced here. It has been informed by a range of consultations and studies undertaken by my Department and is working well.

Single Farm Payment: Late Payment of Cheques

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department has been fined by the European Union for late payment of Single Farm Payment cheques.

(AQW 2143/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Disallowance for late payments is levied by the Commission at a Member State level. Since the introduction of the Single Farm Payment (SFP) Scheme, the only claim year for which such disallowance has been levied on the UK in regard to SFP was 2005. For 2005, the Commission imposed financial corrections for payments made late totalling €93m (£63.5). None of this late payment disallowance has been attributed to my department.

Publicly Funded Trees

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of publicly funded trees which were planted in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2150/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's Forest Service encourages and supports, through public funding, the planting of trees by private land owners and farmers primarily through the Woodland Grant Schemes for the creation of woodlands and the replanting of their woodlands after felling.

Forest Service also commits public funds to the re-forestation of the Department's forests following harvesting and occasionally will acquire small parcels of additional land for the establishment of new woodland.

Funding has also been made available over the 5 year period to participants in agri-environment schemes for planting small areas (up to 0.2 hectares) of native trees on farmland and managing existing woodland. These schemes include the Countryside Management Scheme and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme. The data that the Department holds is area-based and includes both the planting of trees to form new woodland and the management of existing woodland.

The data available for woodland creation (which includes public and private afforestation grant aided), replanting following harvesting, is recorded by area (hectare) and not by the numbers of trees planted. A summary of tree planting by area, over the last five years, that has been publically funded by my Department is as follows:

Year	Woodland creation (hectares) on private land supported by the Woodland Grant Scheme and on DARD's forest estate.	Replanting of woodland (hectares) on DARD's forest estate and on private land supported by the Woodland Grant Scheme
2005/06	606	939
2006/07	549	811
2007/08	552	533
2008/09	289	841
2009/10	213	701
Total	2,209	3,825

The data held in relation to other Departmental Agri-environment Schemes does not separately quantify new areas planted from management of existing woodland.

Administrative Costs and Burden on Farmers

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department has taken since May 2007 to reduce the administrative costs and burden on farmers.

(AQW 2151/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In 2007 I, along with my Ministerial colleague at the time from the Department of Environment Arlene Foster, asked an independent panel to review the regulations that apply in the agri-food sector in the north of Ireland with a view to simplifying and reducing the administrative burden placed on farmers and the industry generally.

The NI Agri-Food Better Regulations and Simplification Review was published in April 2009 and both Departments took time to consider and respond to each of the 85 recommendations contained in the Review.

My Department issued its response to the Better Regulation Review on 18 May 2010. Since then the department has been actively taking forward an extensive programme of work to give effect to the 61 recommendations put forward by the Independent Panel which have been accepted or accepted in principle. Part of my departments response was a commitment to develop an action plan to implement, monitor and review the accepted recommendations. Systems have been put in place which will measure these outcomes in due course. My intention is to publish the final action plan in early December following scrutiny by the ARD Committee.

We have not waited until now to improve our approach, for instance we have put in place an electronic identification system for sheep and goats which was supported and welcomed by the industry.

Moreover in July 2009, we secured a very important derogation from Brussels benefiting flock keepers with the introduction of the sheep electronic identification system (EID); the concession provides central points of recording reducing the administrative burden on flockkeepers, who will not need in general to purchase EID readers. My officials have worked extremely hard to deliver this legislation and supported its implementation. More than 1,100 sheep farmers attended EID training events in 13 markets across the north, this was in addition to information evenings delivered by staff from CAFRE, Veterinary Service and Animal Health and Welfare policy.

There has been an increased uptake of APHIS Online. Since September 2010, in response to customer demand officials from my Department have trained 450 farmers on the use of APHIS Online with a further 550 to be trained by March 2011.

This training and increased promotion of APHIS Online has seen cattle birth registrations via this channel rise from 34% in October 2009 to 45% in October 2010. This service allows 24 hour access and is in keeping with customers expectations.

Computerisation of the application process for Agri-environment schemes has contributed to reducing the administrative burden for farmers who participate in the new Countryside Management Scheme.

The Department has eliminated herd size as a factor when synchronising annual Brucellosis surveillance herd tests with any due TB herd test.

While not part of the Review, the Department is striving to implement other new initiatives as efficiently and with the least amount of bureaucratic burden to the industry as possible. The Manure Efficiency Technology Scheme (METS) - Tranche 2 is a capital grants scheme which re-opens for applications on Wednesday 1 December 2010. It will provide financial support for farmers who wish to purchase specialised slurry spreading equipment. In order to support the greater use of online facilities to access DARD key services and schemes, farmers are being encouraged to submit their applications electronically through the award of additional marks, although paper applications will continue to be accepted, by hand or by post. On-line applications are the way ahead for more rapid service delivery, reduced paperwork and less bureaucracy.

The Farm Modernisation Programme is another example where there has been a significant increase in farmers making use of an enhanced on-line application process. The Department received approximately 7000 on-line applications for the Programme and this represents in the region of 90% of the total applications submitted. This shows that farmers have reacted positively to this new system of submitting applications and it is a real step forward in reducing the time and cost farmers are asked to spend on paperwork.

These are just some of the actions my department has taken to reduce the administrative burden on farmers. I can assure you that I and my department remain committed to reducing the level of red tape and achieving the PSA Target to reduce the administrative burden on the agri-food sector by 25% by 2013 – with an interim target of 15% by 2011.

Agricultural Employers

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in each of the last three years, how many agricultural employers were found to have paid workers a rate below that set by the Agricultural Wages Board for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2152/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The number of employers who were found to have paid workers a wage rate below that set by the Agricultural Wages Board for NI was as follows:

- three employers in 2007;
- five employers in 2008 and
- one in 2009.

Funding for Agrienvironment Schemes

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she intends to continue funding for agri-environment schemes so that work to halt the loss of species and habitat in the countryside can continue.

(AQW 2172/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Agri-environment measures are funded from the Rural Development Plan (RDP) 2007 - 2013. There are currently over 12,500 participants in agri-environment schemes. These schemes aim to enhance biodiversity, improve water quality and mitigate climate change.

The number of new Countryside Management Scheme agreements to be progressed depends on the availability of national funding. Now that the outcome of the spending review has been announced, we know the level of budget available to the Executive from the British Treasury and the Executives' Budget Review Group are now discussing the wider budget.

Decisions will be taken on how this money will be allocated and at the moment it is too early for me to speculate about the future of funding for agri-environment schemes.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether any of her Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2217/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The current economic situation is placing significant pressures on public spending and the Executive is assessing the implications of the recent Spending Review announcement.

While decisions have not yet been taken at Executive level about the level of resource and capital that will be available to individual Departments I can assure you that, my Department will take its Section 75 equality duties seriously.

Once the Executive has agreed a draft Budget my Department will produce an overarching Equality Impact Assessment at departmental level at which stage the key policy decisions will be subjected to a full and rigorous equality assessment.

My Equality team will be liaising closely with key organisations and equality interest groups to ensure that everyone knows how they can engage with us during any EQIA consultation. My Department would wish to consult on any proposals in tandem with any Executive consultation on the overall draft Budget position.

Livestock Thefts

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of recorded incidents of livestock thefts in each Divisional Veterinary Office area in each of the last five years, broken down by the type of livestock stolen and the number of each type stolen.

(AQW 2252/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Herdkeepers are not obliged to inform DARD of the theft of their livestock and therefore this information is not recorded. I would advise that the PSNI may be in a position to provide further information.

Rural Development Programme Funding

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the difficulties being experienced by the Local Action Groups tasked with the distribution of Rural Development Programme

funding, what plans she has to address the problems with the programme criteria to enable the LAGs to distribute funding more effectively.

(AQW 2454/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I informed the Assembly on 28 September, I have asked officials to undertake a review of Axis 3 delivery and of what and where the blockages are. This has commenced, and the work will review processes and procedures around the delivery of the programme.

Local Action Groups, Joint Council Committees and Lead Councils are all contributing, and I will receive a report from officials in December.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Libraries in the North Down Area

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many people (i) visited; and (ii) joined each library in the North Down area in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2173/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): The table below shows the number of people who visited each library in the North Down area in each of the last five years. The libraries I am listing as being in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency area are; Bangor Carnegie, Holywood and Donaghadee.

	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10
Bangor Carnegie	157,144	143,936	144,144	113,464	169,988
Holywood	105,612	107,848	82,472	83,044	98,644
Donaghadee	34,632	37,856	36,556	43,732	47,580

The following table shows the number of people who joined each library in the North Down area in each of the last five years.

	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10
Bangor Carnegie	2,016	1,793	1,787	4,102	4,662
Holywood	1,066	797	695	742	751
Donaghadee	555	342	488	502	491

Shankill Cultural Quarter in North and West Belfast

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether his Department supports the concept of a Shankill Cultural Quarter in North and West Belfast.

(AQW 2180/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The creation of a Shankill Cultural Quarter would be an excellent way to promote the Shankill and its many tourist attractions and places of interest and would also boost the local economy.

My Department and I are very supportive of any project that will attract more visitors and tourists to the Shankill area and improve the quality of life for those who live in the area.

Fish Population in the Feeder Rivers to Lough Neagh

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to determine the (i) health; and (ii) level of the fish population in the feeder rivers to Lough Neagh.

(AQW 2193/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is responsible for fish health in the Northern Ireland through the monitoring, control and prevention of fish disease.

DCAL is responsible for the conservation and protection of salmon and freshwater fish. As part of this it is essential to monitor fish populations to inform decisions on conservation and protection measures to be undertaken.

During 2010, DCAL Inland Fisheries Group staff carried out a semi-quantitative assessment of juvenile Atlantic salmon and brown trout populations on the following tributaries of Lough Neagh: Main, Six Mile Water, Glenavy, Upper Bann, Blackwater, Ballinderry, Moyola. In all approximately 640 sites on Lough Neagh tributaries have been surveyed this year.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2218/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Executive has yet to decide on budget allocations to departments. After this process has been completed, my Department will conduct high level impact assessments to determine the impact of its own allocation on equality, good relations, poverty/ social inclusion and sustainable development.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11; and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2319/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department did not facilitate any internships during the current financial year 2010/11. At this stage there are plans to facilitate one intern during 2011/12, subject to confirmation that insurance indemnity cover will be provided by the relevant University. Any further requests received will be considered in accordance with the relevant NICS policy.

Derry City Football Club

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding has been allocated to Derry City Football Club in each of the last four financial years; and for what purpose was the funding allocated.

(AQW 2358/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. SNI advises that in the last four financial years it has received no applications for funding from Derry City Football Club and consequently no funding has been provided.

Capital Projects

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the capital projects valued above £10,000 that Sport NI agreed to fund in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2406/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The following awards above £10,000 have been made by Sport NI to capital projects in each of the last five years:

2006/07

Project	Award
Enniskillen Gaels GAA	405,123
Tyrone GAA County Board	613,770
Ballymena United FC	161,636
Down GCC County Board	800,000
Fermanagh District Council	41,098
Salto Gymnastic Centre	139,531
Swim Ulster Ltd	17,589
2006/07 Total	2,178,747

2007/08

Project	Award
Donaghmore & District Community Association	937,000
Portadown FC	800,000
Armagh GAA County Board	830,693
Antrim GAA County Board	565,773
Waringstown Cricket Club	40,000
Derry GAA County Board	800,000
Lisnaskea Emmetts GAC	220,000
Ulster Gliding Club	80,258
Donaghadee Sailing Club	725,074
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	100,000
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	150,000
Greysteel Community Enterprise	558,167
Larne Bowling & Lawn Tennis Club	520,000
O'Brien's GAC	245,000
St Colm's GAC	100,000
St Mary's GAC	235,000
The Cliff	2,107,284
Kildress Wolfe Tones GAC	245,000
Kickhams Creggan GAC	240,000
Bready Cricket Club	1,692,451
Hanwood Trust Company Ltd	1,426,277

Project	Award
Na Magha Hurling & Camogie Club	286,342
2007/08 Total	12,904,319

2008/09

Project	Award
St Canice's GFC	245,000
Belfast Activity Centre	230,131
Cliftonville FC	300,000
Moyola Park AFC	1,570,000
Donegal Celtic FC	637,764
Donegal Celtic FC	186,369
Derrygonnelly Harps GAC	142,302
St Malachy's GAC (Castledawson)	225,000
Lisburn Racquets Club	124,914
All Saints GAC	248,195
Coleraine & District Riding for the Disabled Association	1,224,269
Glen Rovers GAC	188,793
Ballerin GAC	225,000
Brookeborough Heber Macmahon GAC	68,987
Galbally Pearses GFC	200,565
Tir Na nOg GAC	245,000
Wolfe Tones GAC (Bellaghy)	180,000
Fort Centre RDA	79,005
St Mary's GAC (Ahoghill)	225,000
Derrylin O'Connells GAA	137,604
Lurgan RFC & Cricket Club	126,093
St Mary's GAC (Slaughtmanus)	210,000
Dromara GFC	245,000
Newry Olympic Hockey Club	308,305
O'Donovan Rossa GAC (Magherafelt)	225,000
Cookstown Hockey Club	671,210
Belfast Royal Academy	245,000
Tempo Maguire's GFC	245,000
Ballyclare RFC	67,678

Project	Award
County Antrim Yacht Club	452,496
Antrim Borough Council	160,126
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	100,000
St Colcille's GAC (Armagh)	210,000
Dergview FC	152,084
Limavady Cricket & RFC	216,632
Countryside Access and Activities Network for NI	34,430
Owen Roe GAC (Coleraine)	245,000
Drumragh Sarsfields GAC	798,000
Coagh Sports Centre	213,329
Slaughtneil Robert Emmets GAC	119,140
Pearses Gaelic Football & Camogie Club	170,000
Pearse Og GFC	245,000
Strabane District Council	175,585
Termoneeny Community Centre	862,899
Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group	1,765,994
Newtownabbey Borough Council	146,529
Fermanagh District Council	40,082
North Down Borough Council	380,970
Glenravel Community Development Association	998,892
Castlereagh Borough Council	48,788
Taghnevan Sports Limited	245,000
Lavey GAC	829,726
Derry City Council	88,155
Derry City Council	238,017
Derry City Council	66,235
UB Irish Rugby Football Union	1,215,000
Sports Institute NI	60,000
2008/09 Total	19,305,293

2009/10

Project	Award
Portadown FC	314,495
Newry City FC	231,500

Project	Award
Ballinamallard United FC	87,050
Ballinamallard United FC	132,978
Dungannon Swifts FC	232,000
Armagh GAA County Board	551,804
Armagh GAA County Board	256,196
Ballymena United FC	557,985
Ballymena United FC	250,015
Ballymena United FC	217,035
Crusaders FC	231,631
Crusaders FC	209,075
Knockbreda FC	87,100
Moyola Park AFC	83,079
Ballyclare Comrades FC	232,000
Down GAA County Board	149,168
Down GAA County Board	658,832
Glenavon FC	347,000
Muckamore Cricket & Tennis Club	124,233
Portstewart FC	79,713
St Malachy's GAC (Castlewellan)	245,000
Lurgan Celtic FC	77,905
An Ríocht GAC	233,340
Belleeks GFC	241,688
Templepatrick Cricket Club	84,384
Dromore St Dymphna GFC	230,000
Fintona Pearses GAC	245,000
H&W Welders FC	75,488
Aghaloo O'Neills GFC	245,000
Ballyholme Yacht Club	12,499
Drumgath GAC	245,000
Dunngannon Thomas Clarke GFC	226,675
Clonduff GAC	245,000
Southern Education and Library Board	448,063
St Joseph's GAC (Craigbane)	245,000
St Eugenes GAC (Castlederg)	220,000

Project	Award
RUC Athletic Association	67,403
Annagh United FC	84,872
Tullysaran O'Connells GAC	245,000
Strangford Lough Yacht Club	199,543
St Martins GAC	245,000
Dunloy GAC	142,500
John Mitchel's GAC	612,826
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	405,366
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	385,500
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	385,500
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	385,500
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	100,000
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	162,817
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	50,000
An Maigh Tir Na nOg GAC	97,329
Lisburn Cricket Club	26,033
Warrenpoint Town FC	245,000
Total 2009/10	12,193,120

2010/11 (TO DATE)

Project	Award
Linfield FC	43,907
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	45,492
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	23,209
Portadown Boating Club	430,313
Irish Football Association	161,881
Total 2010/11 (todate)	704,802

Sport NI will in December 2010 announce awards for its Sport Matters: Capital and Equipment Programme and for its Awards for Sport Programme. A total of £2.5m will be awarded to 200 capital projects. A significant number of these individual awards will be in excess of £10,000.

Department of Education

Central Integrated Primary School in Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education what maintenance or capital works are planned for the Central Integrated Primary School in Bangor.

(AQW 2138/11)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): The South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) is responsible for maintenance and minor works at controlled schools. The SEELB has confirmed that the following work is planned during the 2010/11 year:-

Toilet Refurbishment	£80k
Mobile classroom Refurbishment	£12k
Fire Risk Assessment Remedial Works	Cost to be finalised.

Tá scéim fhéideartha móroibreacha caipitil do Bangor Central Integrated Primary School ag céim an Bhreithmheasa Eacnamaíochta (EA) faoi láthair ach níor fógraíodh an scoil le haghaidh cistithe caipitil. Is í an rogha a mholtar san EA ná scoil nua a thógáil ar shuíomh sínte.

A potential major capital works scheme for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School is currently at Economic Appraisal (EA) stage but has not been announced for capital funding. The recommended option in the EA is to build a new school on an extended site.

As for all capital schemes, the progression of the Bangor Central scheme is dependent on the availability of the necessary resources and hence no guarantee can be given as to when the scheme will proceed.

I have effectively utilised the capital funding made available to me and with additional funding could do much more to address the historic under investment in the schools estate.

Primary Schools: Dining Facilities

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools do not have designated dining facilities; and what is this figure as a percentage of all primary schools.

(AQW 2139/11)

Minister of Education: It is recommended by Department of Education Primary Schools Building Handbook that primary schools are constructed with a multipurpose hall. This hall is designed to be utilised for assembly, Physical Education, performing arts activities/presentations involving large school groups, and in all but the larger schools, dining. The larger primary schools are recommended to have dedicated dining rooms.

The Education and Library Boards have responsibility for carrying out surveys of the individual properties that make up the schools' estate. The information from these surveys is stored on the Manhattan estate management system. Unfortunately these surveys are purely for the teaching and associated areas and hence do not currently include school meals accommodation. In addition some of the schools in the estate may not have been surveyed for various reasons, for example if they are part of a Public Private Partnership scheme or have been constructed recently.

Níl eolas ar fáil ach ar 818 ceann de na 846 bunscoil sa tuaisceart. As na 818 scoil sin, léiríonn an córas Manhattan go bhfuil 753 bunscoil ann a bhfuil halla ilfheidhme acu agus d'fhéadfaí go mbeadh seomra bia ar leith ag cuid de na scoileanna sin (na scoileanna is mó) fosta. Is ionann sin agus 92% de na scoileanna a ndearna suirbhé orthu.

Current information is only available on 818 of the 846 primary schools in the north. Of these 818 schools the Manhattan system shows that there are 753 primary schools with a multipurpose hall and

some of these schools (the larger ones) may also have a dedicated dining room. These represent 92% of the schools that have been surveyed.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education whether any of her Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2230/11)

Minister of Education: Is féidir liom a dhearbhu go mbeidh aon chinneadh a dhéanaim ar phleananna caiteachais mo Roinne mar chuid de phróiseas Bhuiséad 2010 faoi réir Scrúdaithe Comhionannais agus comhlánú foirme um scrúdú comhionannais.

I can confirm that any decisions I make on spending plans for my Department as part of the Budget 2010 process will be subject to Equality Screening and the completion of an equality screening form. The comprehensive screening form will be completed for each proposal and this will identify any potential equality impact, set out any mitigating action or further assessment that may be required. When considering budget proposals, as is always the case, each decision will be based on the underlying principles of need and equality.

Junior Schools

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Education whether her Department plans to phase out all junior schools from the education system.

(AQW 2278/11)

Minister of Education: Is ceist don údarás ábhartha scoile ar an chéad dul síos í pleanáil an eastáit scoile i gcomhthéacs na creatlaí beartais atá ag an Roinn Oideachais.

The planning of the schools' estate within the context of DE's policy framework is a matter for the relevant school authority to consider in the first instance.

School Maintenance

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education (i) for her assessment of the decision by the Education and Library Boards to introduce measured term contracts for school maintenance; and (ii) to detail how much the Belfast Education and Library Board spent on these contracts since May 2007.

(AQW 2292/11)

Minister of Education: Is bealach le cur chuige comhsheasmhach a chur i bhfeidhm thar na ELBanna ar fad iad na conarthaí ar Sheirbhís Téarma agus déantar cinnte go gcloíann siad le treoir an Bhoird Sholáthair agus an Stiúthóireachta um Sholáthar Lárnach (DFP).

Term Service contracts are a means of adopting a consistent approach across the ELBs and to ensure compliance with the direction of the Procurement Board and the Central Procurement Directorate (DFP).

The Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) has already introduced this form of procurement. The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) is in the final stages of introducing TSCs and the remaining ELBs have indicated they intend to adopt the process in the 2011/12 financial year.

In 2006 The Belfast Education and Library Board reviewed its method of provision of building maintenance and in consultation with the Departments of Education and Finance and Personnel developed a measured term contract for the provision of these services. This approach followed best practice operating at that time within public sector organisations.

The total amount spent by the BELB on this form of contract since its introduction in 2007 is approximately £41.1m.

School Maintenance

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education for her Department's assessment of the benefits of introducing measured term contracts for school maintenance.

(AQW 2295/11)

Minister of Education: Measured Term Contracts are not new to the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and have been used to deliver maintenance across the schools' estate for the past 10 years. However, these contracts have now expired and are being replaced by NEC3 Term Service Contracts.

Is bealach iad na conarthaí ar Sheirbhís Téarma le cur chuige comhsheasmhach dea-chleachtais a chur i bhfeidhm thar na ELBanna chun a chinntiú go gcloítear le treoir an Bhoird Sholáthair agus an Stiúrthóireachta um Sholáthar Lárnach (DFP).

Term Service Contracts are a means of adopting a consistent and best practice approach across the ELBs to ensure compliance with the direction of the Procurement Board and the Central Procurement Directorate (DFP).

Term Service Contracts are the preferred option for maintenance work where a service over a period is required with the possibility of large numbers of individual task orders as opposed to a single project.

The ELBs recognise the benefits of Term Service Contracts and have developed a procurement strategy in line with CPD guidelines taking into consideration the needs of small to medium enterprises and existing contractors. This strategy will also reduce the administrative burden of tendering and streamline the management processes.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education how many interns her Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2325/11)

Minister of Education: Ní bhfuair an Roinn Oideachais aon iarrtas go data le haghaidh Intéirneachtaí sna blianta 2010/11 nó 2011/12.

To date the Department of Education has not received any formal applications for Internships in 2010/11 or 2011/12.

School Maintenance

Mr P Givan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1398/11, to provide a breakdown of the spending on the maintenance of each school in the Lagan Valley constituency, in each of the last three years; and to detail the current backlog, including estimated costs for each school.

(AQW 2328/11)

Minister of Education: Mionshonraítear sa tábla atá léirithe thíos caiteachas ar Chothabháil gach scoile i dtoghcheantar Ghleanna an Lagáin i ngach bliain le trí bliana anuas.

The table below shows a breakdown of spend on the Maintenance of each school in the Lagan Valley Constituency in each of the last three years.

School Name	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £
Barbour Nursery	5946.00	5253.00	12533.00
Pond Park Nursery	7505.00	7624.00	3299.00
Holy Trinity Nursery	4276.00	5347.00	15754.00
Anahilt Primary	7473.00	9197.00	7331.00

School Name	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £
Ballycarrickmaddy Primary	14283.00	15156.00	29188.00
Ballymacash Primary	18551.00	24228.00	29417.00
Brownlee Primary	34556.00	13399.00	16408.00
Carr Primary	11343.00	14339.00	9151.00
Derriaghy Primary	2409.00	6397.00	35318.00
Dromara Primary	18755.00	37015.00	27441.00
Dunmurry Primary	14019.00	11348.00	24564.00
Fort Hill Integrated Primary	22471.00	17855.00	35569.00
Harmony Hill Primary	52692.00	39408.00	60770.00
Killowen Primary	17964.00	7552.00	25822.00
Knockmore Primary	36067.00	20525.00	45598.00
Largymore Primary	55323.00	6149.00	15736.00
Lisburn Central Primary	5694.00	27127.00	21874.00
Lower Ballinderry Primary	3583.00	11066.00	9639.00
Maghaberry Primary	18951.00	18675.00	20282.00
McKinney Primary	21090.00	8613.00	27365.00
Moirra Primary	14540.00	17740.00	34793.00
Old Warren Primary	4479.00	4084.00	57184.00
Pond Park Primary	8703.00	8699.00	7641.00
Seymour Hill Primary	16585.00	48107.00	11744.00
Tonagh Primary	24202.00	22040.00	17139.00
Downshire Primary School	15547.00	20364.00	22347.00
Riverdale Primary	31758.00	-11039.00	19077.00
Meadow Bridge Primary School	12243.00	3369.00	14942.00
Ballymacrocket Primary	3872.00	1633.00	4869.00
Ballymacward Primary	2410.00	6214.00	13498.00
Christ The Redeemer Primary	68893.00	14787.00	35485.00
Saint Aloysius Primary	7805.00	19682.00	31547.00
Saint Colmans P.S. (Lisburn)	7299.00	4317.00	902.00
Saint Josephs P.S. (Lisburn)	12319.00	24312.00	41538.00
Dunmurry High School	23269.00	21743.00	87028.00
Laurelhill Community College	102431.00	99082.00	77370.00
Lisnagarvey High	58886.00	53333.00	159258.00

School Name	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £
Saint Patricks High School	22851.00	63374.00	53221.00
Fort Hill College	57375.00	76981.00	192216.00
Friends School	0.00	0.00	0.00
Wallace High	1360.00	0.00	0.00
Beechlawn Special School	75234.00	54534.00	116595.00
Brookfield Special	14641.00	12843.00	8198.00
Parkview Special	21481.00	24040.00	84117.00
Dromore (New Nursery)	1868.37	1567.00	2357.68
Dromore Central PS	6377.20	6364.37	8038.32
Fair Hill PS	12194.28	3473.15	1997.32
St Colman's PS (Dromore)	28882.78	3817.51	1121.62
St Michael's PS (Finnis)	4895.74	16924.99	1652.37
Dromore HS	16169.97	18160.49	30421.95

The table below details the current maintenance backlog for each school in the Lagan Valley constituency.

School Name	Total Maintenance backlog £
Barbour Nursery	1650.00
Pond Park Nursery	12650.00
Holy Trinity Nursery	16825.00
Anahilt Primary	35715.00
Ballycarrickmaddy Primary	2270.00
Ballymacash Primary	136780.00
Brownlee Primary	138045.00
Carr Primary	40525.00
Derriaghy Primary	156775.00
Dromara Primary	23545.00
Dunmurry Primary	160330.00
Fort Hill Integrated Primary	46357.00
Harmony Hill Primary	152934.00
Killowen Primary	339760.00
Knockmore Primary	283026.00
Largymore Primary	243822.00
Lisburn Central Primary	116760.00

School Name	Total Maintenance backlog £
Maghaberry Primary	5600.00
McKinney Primary	20720.00
Moirra Primary	31730.00
Old Warren Primary	131159.00
Seymour Hill Primary	24670.00
Tonagh Primary	24925.00
Riverdale Primary	830.00
Meadow Bridge Primary School	481.00
Ballymacward Primary	1280.00
Christ The Redeemer Primary	17692.00
Saint Aloysius Primary	314000.00
Saint Josephs PS. (Lisburn)	303605.00
Dunmurry High School	558960.00
Laurelhill Community College	396770.00
Lisnagarvey High	174430.00
Saint Patricks High School	274460.00
Fort Hill College	391135.00
Friends School	502920.00
Beechlawn Special School	119045.00
Parkview Special	21820.00
Dromore Central Primary School	645565.00
Fairhill Primary School	5900.00
St Colman's Primary School (Dromore)	24115.00
St Michael's Primary School (Finnis)	83640.00
Dromore High School	441245.00

Figures for the Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools are not readily available.

Travel Claims

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of travel claims by departmental staff in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2362/11)

Minister of Education: Seo a leanas caiteachas mo Roinne ar éilimh taistil ag baill foirne na roinne i ngach bliain le trí bliana anuas:

My Department's spend on travel claims by departmental staff in each of the last three years was as follows:

2007-08	£438,215.92
2008-09	£502,883.00
2009-10	£495,734.79

Alternative Education Provision

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to outline the current arrangements for Alternative Education Provision and what plans she has for its future development.

(AQW 2374/11)

Minister of Education: Is í an scoil an áit is fearr do pháistí agus do dhaoine óga le hoideachas a fháil. Fágann daoine óga an t-oideachas mar gheall ar chúiseanna éagsúla nach mbaineann le mo Roinn amháin.

The best place for children and young people to be educated is in school. Young people disengage from education for a variety of reasons which are not within the remit of my Department alone to address. If a young person cannot sustain their school placement and they require alternative education provision, responsibility for making this provision rests with the relevant Education and Library Board. Currently that provision is made by Board services or through voluntary organisations by arrangement with the Board.

My Department has been reviewing alternative education provision. The aim is to ensure that every child or young person, whatever barriers to learning he or she faces, is supported to sustain a school placement and to receive timely support within school. I have introduced a significant range of policies or policy proposals that will contribute to this, in particular, policies on transfer, school improvement, literacy and numeracy, the revised curriculum and entitlement framework, special educational needs and inclusion and programmes to support pupil health and well-being. I will also be considering the particular problems faced by young people in developing our new Priorities for Youth Strategy.

Furthermore, where the needs of an individual young person are best met out of the mainstream school environment the alternative provision should address their educational as well as their physical, emotional and social needs.

Alongside our consideration of the future development of alternative education provision we have, as with other Departments, engaged in discussions with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to see how our work can contribute to developing a strategic approach to our young people who are not in education, employment or training. We also want to ensure that the findings of the DEL Committee's inquiry into this issue are taken into account in future alternative education provision arrangements.

South Belfast Area Project

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Education what funding is available for the continuation of detached outreach youth workers for the South Belfast Area Project.

(AQW 2385/11)

Minister of Education: The Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) is responsible for detached outreach workers in the South Belfast Area Project.

The Chief Executive of the BELB has advised that it is funding two outreach worker posts within the South Belfast Area Project, and that these posts are secured until March 2011. The estimated costs associated with the two project posts will total £70,000 in the 2010/11 financial year. The BELB had also advised that it will make a decision on the funding for outreach posts across Belfast from April 2011 onwards after DE has notified it of its budget allocation for 2011/12.

Maidir le cistiú do na blianta atá le teacht, caithfidh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin Clár don Rialtas agus dréachtbhuiséad a leagfaidh amach Pleananna Caiteachais na Ranna don chéad 4 bliana eile a chomhaontú. Go dtí go gcomhaontaítear iad, ní bheidh mé ábalta aon mhionchinntí a dhéanamh ar mhaoiniú a thabharfar do sheirbhísí oideachais.

As far as funding for future years is concerned, the Executive need to agree a Programme for Government and a draft budget setting Departmental Spending Plans for the next 4 years. Until this happens, I will not be in a position to make any detailed decisions on future funding for education services.

In setting education budgets, my key priority will be to ensure that children come first, that resources are targeted on the basis of need, that we adhere to our equality duties and that any potential savings are delivered in a way that protects front line education services as far as possible. It will be a matter for the BELB to determine how it deploys resources made available to it in 2011/12 taking account of the need to ensure that resources are allocated on an equitable basis and based on an assessment of objective need, in line Ministerial priorities.

Magherafelt Primary School

Mr I McCreia asked the Minister of Education why her Department has not yet approved the revised economic appraisal for Magherafelt Primary School.

(AQW 2418/11)

Minister of Education: Tá an Breithmheas Eacnamaíochta leasaithe do Magherafelt Primary School ag céim dheiridh an bhreithniúcháin.

The revised Economic Appraisal for Magherafelt Primary School is at an advanced stage of consideration.

Educational Psychologists

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Education how many educational psychologists are currently available to assess children in the Irish-medium sector, through the medium of Irish; and to detail the geographical area they cover.

(AQW 2427/11)

Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne dom gur mar seo a leanas atá líon na síceolaithe oideachais atá ar fáil le measúnú a dhéanamh ar pháistí in earnáil na Gaelscolaíochta trí mheán na Gaeilge;

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the number of educational psychologists (EPs) available to assess children in the Irish Medium sector through the medium of Irish is as follows;

Belfast	None
North Eastern	One. Coverage is throughout the whole Board area.
South Eastern	One. Coverage is throughout the whole Board area.
Southern	One. Coverage is throughout the whole Board area.
Western	Two. EP is based in Derry and caters for all 3 Irish medium schools in the city. The second EP covers County Fermanagh.

Strandtown Primary School

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2277/11, (i) to define 'appropriate accountability'; and (ii) to clarify which part of the revised curriculum is not currently being delivered by Strandtown Primary School.

(AQW 2542/11)

Minister of Education: Bíonn páistí ó Bhlianta 4 -7 ag freastal ar Strandtown Primary School. Mar sin de, ní sholáthraíonn an scoil an Bhonnchéim den churaclam athbhreithnithe ná an chéad bhliain

d'Eochairchéim 1. Déanann an scoil measúnú ar dhaltai ag deireadh Eochairchéim 1 áfach, agus bíonn an scoil freagrach as na torthaí a fhaigheann siad ag deireadh na hEochairchéime sin.

Strandtown Primary School is attended by children in Years 4 - 7. It therefore does not deliver the Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum or the first year of Key Stage 1. It does, however, assess pupils at the end of Key Stage 1 and is accountable for the outcomes they achieve at the end of that Key Stage. While it is clear to me that the school currently handles the transition of pupils very effectively, it is important, as part of a decision-making process that could result in a very significant investment of public funds, that we take stock of that model of provision in the context of the revised curriculum and the new assessment arrangements.

The Belfast Education and Library Board is the school managing authority for Strandtown and its feeder schools. It is therefore the responsibility of the board, working with the schools involved, to provide the necessary assurances to the Department that the transition which occurs in the middle of a key stage in this model is managed effectively to ensure seamless delivery of the revised curriculum and the associated assessment arrangements in the best interest of the pupils.

Department for Employment and Learning

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the content of his Department's letter to the Belfast Metropolitan College in relation to his Department's approval of its College Improvement Plan and whether he will place a copy of this letter in the Assembly library.
(AQW 2167/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr D Kennedy): In order to address the findings and recommendations of the Efficiency Review of Belfast Metropolitan College, my Department requested that the College develop a College Improvement Plan to identify those actions required to restore the College to sound financial health and stability.

Whilst the development of the Plan is the responsibility of the College, my Department has a key oversight, scrutiny and challenge role to ensure that the Plan is realistic, comprehensive and robust. Officials from my Department have met with the College to discuss the Plan on numerous occasions and continue to do so to ensure that the College is brought into financial stability.

Following the submission of the final version of the Plan and a detailed examination and consideration of its contents, my Department wrote formally to the College setting out its view that the Plan had considered all key elements of the College operations, that, if implemented as planned, the proposals are projected to return the College to financial stability, whilst also acknowledging the significant challenges which faced the College in fully implementing its proposals.

Overall, my Department concluded that it found the Plan acceptable as the basis of achieving financial stability, however, it noted that the proposals would need vigilant and rigorous management action to ensure that they are implemented effectively and that the Department would be carefully monitoring its implementation.

The letter also contained some specific and detailed references to the College's developments at Titanic Quarter and Springvale which relate to ongoing development of policy and production of business cases which are considered to be, potentially, commercially sensitive. However, I am content that a copy of the letter be placed in the Assembly library with the sensitive information redacted as appropriate.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether an Equality Impact Assessment was carried out on Belfast Metropolitan College's 'College Improvement Plan'.
(AQW 2168/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Further education colleges are incorporated bodies, established under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. College governing bodies are, therefore, responsible for all matters relating to the good management of the college including a statutory duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 for promoting equality of opportunity. The Department would not, therefore, have a formal role in the internal processes of the College in implementing its statutory obligations under equality legislation.

I understand, however, that the College has not yet carried out an equality impact assessment on the College Improvement Plan. College management are currently consulting with staff and staff representative bodies about the proposals set out in the Plan and the outcome of those consultations will help inform the decision as to whether an equality impact assessment will be required in respect of the Plan, or specific elements within it.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department has considered the out-turn statement of accounts provided by the Belfast Metropolitan College to the Northern Ireland Audit Office at the end of July 2010.
(AQW 2171/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department required all further education colleges to provide a copy of the draft accounts for the 2009/2010 academic year which were being submitted to the Northern Ireland Audit Office. This was to allow detailed consideration, examination and review of the statements in order to assess if they contained any issues of concern, or significant deviations from the projected position, which had not been identified through the regular monitoring reviews carried out by the Department during the year.

All further education colleges, including Belfast Metropolitan College, have complied with this requirement and the Department has reviewed all draft accounts presented to it. Only two significant issues, relating to the accounting treatment of a pension credit and a reduction in the value of land and buildings, were identified, both of these matters applying to all colleges.

Once the financial statements are audited and signed off by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Department will carry out a further review.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the concerns expressed by the public regarding the proposed redundancies at the Belfast Metropolitan College, whether he will immediately provide the Committee for Employment and Learning and the relevant trade unions with the proposed redundancy figure.
(AQW 2174/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Belfast Metropolitan College's Improvement Plan has identified a need for 168 potential redundancies.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for (i) his assessment of (a) the financial reserves; and (b) the amount in bank accounts currently held by the Belfast Metropolitan College; and (ii) the ratio of the financial reserves to the amount in bank accounts at the end of July 2010.
(AQW 2175/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The information that my Department has relating to the position at 31 July 2010 for Belfast Metropolitan College is based on, as yet, unaudited financial statements. As a result, there is a possibility that some adjustments may be made to these figures as a result of the audit process.

At that date, however, the financial statements indicate that the College's income and expenditure reserve stood at £7.7m and that it had a cash balance of £6.1m. Accordingly, the ratio of the income and expenditure reserve to the cash in bank accounts at 31 July 2010, as requested in part (ii) of your question, is 1.26:1.

Whilst, on the face of it, these balances appear significant, you will be aware that the College has embarked on a major capital investment programme within Belfast and is currently developing new campus buildings at Titanic Quarter and Springvale which will provide the College with modern state of the art facilities.

As a result, the College is required to invest a considerable proportion of its resources in financing these developments in the short term and so it is anticipated that these balances will reduce significantly over the next 18 months.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2233/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: 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 (ECNI) 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. In relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review proposals, Section 75 legislation requires us to assess the likely impact of any proposed spending decisions or reductions in expenditure on all of the categories listed in the legislation. Should the initial high level equality impact screening demonstrate the potential for significant impact on equality of opportunity on any of the nine categories, a full Equality Impact Assessment will be conducted following the ECNI Guidance.

Medical Students

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the percentage of medical students from Northern Ireland who attended Queen's University in (i) 2007/08; and (ii) 2008/09 who were from socio-economic class 4-7.

(AQW 2284/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The percentages of full-time, undergraduate¹ medical students from Northern Ireland, enrolled at Queen's University in 2007/08 and 2008/09, from socio-economic classes 4 to 7 are 21.5% and 20.2% respectively.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- 1 Data on socio-economic class are routinely collected for full-time undergraduates only.
- 2 Caution should be exercised when comparing the 2008/09 SEC figure with the previous year due to a change in the question asked by UCAS.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether any of her Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2231/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): As part of DETI's preparations for Budget 2010, High Level Impact Assessments (HLIAs) have been completed for all potential adjustments to expenditure, including bids and potential reductions.

The HLIA has been designed, and agreed by the Equality Commission, for the purposes of mainstreaming equality considerations in budgetary processes.

An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) will be carried out by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister at a strategic level for Budget 2010.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the current situation on the Presbyterian Mutual Society, particularly in relation to the loan package agreed by the UK Government and the availability of this loan package.

(AQW 2253/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Chancellor confirmed in the Spending Review announcement on 20 October 2010 that Northern Ireland's Reinvestment and Reform Initiative borrowing facility would be increased by £175 million in 2011-12 to facilitate a loan to the PMS administrator, and an additional allocation of £25 million in respect of the Coalition Government's contribution to the Mutual Access Fund. These amounts are in addition to the Northern Ireland block grant. The Executive has agreed in principle to contribute £25 million to the Mutual Access Fund with a further £1 million to be sought from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The proposed solution remains subject to Executive, Assembly and EU agreement.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether any collateral has to be provided against the UK Government's loan to the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

(AQW 2254/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland's Reinvestment and Reform Initiative borrowing facility will be increased by £175 million in 2011-12 to facilitate a loan to the PMS administrator.

The terms and conditions of any loan assistance to be made available by the Executive to the administrator of the Presbyterian Mutual Society have not been finalised.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the £25 million pound from the UK Government and the Executive will be made available to the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

(AQW 2255/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Spending Review announcement on 20 October confirmed that the Government's £25 million contribution to proposed Mutual Access Fund will be made available to the Executive in 2011-12

The Executive's £25 million contribution to the Mutual Access Fund is subject to the Executive's and Assembly's agreement.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when small savers with the Presbyterian Mutual Society will have access to their funds; and whether there is any intention to save the Society.

(AQW 2256/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is proposed that Government and Executive funding for the establishment of a Mutual Access Fund and the orderly winding down of the Presbyterian Mutual Society will become available in 2011-12. The proposed solution is subject to Executive, Assembly and EU agreement.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when she expects the Presbyterian Church to make its £1million contribution to the Presbyterian Mutual Society settlement.

(AQW 2257/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It has not yet been agreed when the Presbyterian Church will make a contribution to the proposed establishment of a Mutual Access Fund.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the time-scale for the completion of local and EU agreements to facilitate the resolution of the Presbyterian Mutual Society issue.

(AQW 2276/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Executive, Assembly, and EU agreement to the overall financial package will be required before DETI, acting on behalf of the Executive, puts its proposals to the administrator of the Presbyterian Mutual Society for agreement or otherwise by its members and creditors. H M Government and Executive funding will not become available until the 2011-2012 financial year. This will be progressed as quickly as possible, and the precise timings will become clearer as the implementation process is worked through.

Tourist Signage Policy

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the Tourist Signage Policy has been subject to Equality Screening and an Equality Impact Assessment.

(AQW 2308/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Tourist Signing in Northern Ireland Policy has been subject to Equality Screening and analysis showed that a full Equality Impact Assessment was not deemed necessary.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many interns her Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2321/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment has not facilitated any interns in the 2010/11 year and has no plans for 2011/12 year.

Tourism in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much has been invested in tourism in the Strangford constituency, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2330/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Over the past three years the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has provided investment totalling £315,602 by way of financial assistance made available to 5 tourism projects in the Strangford Constituency. The assistance was paid in each of the last 3 years as follows:

Year	Amount (£)
2008/09	52,890*
2009/10	209,284
2010/11	53,428

* This is an estimated figure being approximately one third share of financial assistance totalling £158,668.54 which was provided for the development of the St Patrick's Christian Heritage Trail during the 2008/09 year. Approximately one third of the trail crosses the Strangford Constituency therefore the constituencies share of the investment may be considered as approximately £52,890.

NITB has also provided support for tourism in the Strangford Constituency over the past 3 years through its promotional campaigns in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This support will continue in the future in recognition of the identification of Strangford as a specific tourism destination in the new Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland.

In addition Invest NI has identified 8 projects in the Tourism sector that were offered support totalling £28,000 over the past 3 years.

Implications of Irish Government's Request for Financial Assistance

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to her response to the Urgent Oral Question 22 November, whether she intends to meet with the Irish Government to discuss the possible implications for Northern Ireland of the financial assistance allocated to the Irish Government; and if not to outline the reasons.

(AQW 2383/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I mentioned in answering the urgent oral question on 22 November 2010, I intend to have discussions with the Irish Government on the matter only if the measures to reduce the Republic of Ireland's Budget deficit have direct implications for the Northern Ireland economy.

Given the bilateral assistance from the UK Government, I and the DFP Minister met the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State on 24 November 2010. At this meeting we stressed the need for the UK assistance to reflect the specific issues of the Northern Ireland economy. I also understand that the DFP Minister intends to meet his Republic of Ireland counterpart to discuss these issues.

I am considering the implications of the Republic of Ireland's National Recovery Plan. I will, of course, continue to actively monitor the situation, particularly with the Irish Government's 2011 Budget due to be announced next week.

Broadband Speeds

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the current broadband speeds available in the (i) Craigavon; (ii) Belfast; (iii) Lisburn; (iv) Londonderry; (v) Omagh; (vi) Enniskillen; (vii) Bangor; (viii) Antrim; (ix) Ballymena; and (x) Newry areas.

(AQW 2390/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Broadband speeds depend on a wide range of factors and in Northern Ireland there are many ways to get broadband. It is a competitive market, with different companies offering different technologies, packages and prices. DETI does not collect or monitor broadband speeds across Northern Ireland on an ongoing basis as, to do so, would be costly and complex in such a competitive and dynamic market.

We have funded projects which have ensured that services of at least 512 kilobits per second are available across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Department of the Environment

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2099/11)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): DFP, through IT Assist, is responsible for most of the telephony services used by the NICS. DFP have advised that as all invoices from various suppliers are consolidated and apportioned across departments based on extension numbers it is not possible to give figures in relation to a single supplier.

The table below provides the costs incurred by my Department in relation to telephony services, to call and tariff level, provided in each of the last five years.

In addition my Department has a number of telecommunication lines that are leased separately from third party companies. The table also provides details of the payments made specifically to BT in connection with these services over the past five years. It is not possible however, to provide a split of these costs between calls and tariff except at disproportionate cost.

DOE	2005/06 £	2006/07 £	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £
Telephony - Tariff	161,470	192,223	191,856	170,072	196,245
Telephony - Calls	186,870	173,635	166,366	126,393	121,177
Line of Business	123,998	134,880	132,886	134,722	125,951
Total	472,338	500,738	491,108	431,187	443,373

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2232/11)

Minister of the Environment: As part of the Budget 2010 process, my Department submitted its spending proposals to DFP at the end of July. Where appropriate, a High Level Equality Impact Assessment (HLIA) was carried out for each spending proposal in accordance with the DFP

guidance issued to all departments. This entailed a high level assessment of the impact of the spending proposals on issues of Equality, Good Relations, Poverty, Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development.

I can confirm that once the final outcome of the Budget 2010 process is known and decisions have been made regarding the delivery of savings in my Department, these will be subject to Equality screening and, where appropriate, Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken.

Procurement

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of the Environment how much has been spent by each local Council on procurement in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2243/11)

Minister of the Environment: You have confirmed that you are specifically interested in procurement expenditure on goods and services. The information is not held centrally by my department under these specific categories and to obtain the information from all 26 councils could only be done at disproportionate cost. The information may be available under these categories from any individual council in which you have an interest.

Planning Applications: Delays

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on planning application P/2010/0485/F; and to explain why, following meetings with the Divisional Planning Manager about this matter, his Department has taken over 8 months to process the application when enforcement proceedings, which triggered the need for an application because of a breach of condition notice, were initiated within a matter of days by the Department.

(AQW 2250/11)

Minister of the Environment: Enforcement proceedings would have been initiated within a matter of days following the receipt of a complaint alleging a non-compliance with a planning condition. This is normal practice on all such enforcement cases within the Division and is in accordance with centrally agreed targets.

In respect of the planning application, processing began immediately upon receipt and all statutory obligations were carried out within the first week of processing.

Further documentation from the applicant's representatives in support of the case were also submitted which included case law. A meeting also took place between the Divisional Planning Manager, the applicant, his representatives and his local MP in relation to this particular case.

As a consequence of the issues raised at this meeting and the documentation submitted, the Division felt it was necessary to seek legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO). This advice remains outstanding, however upon receipt of this, the application will be considered further and an opinion formed for consultation with Council as soon as possible thereafter.

Planning Applications

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has acknowledged the precedent set under S/2009/0245/LDE in its assessment of planning application P/2010/0485/F.

(AQW 2251/11)

Minister of the Environment: The Craigavon Divisional Planning Office is aware of the decision taken under the application S/2009/0245/LDE. However, Planning Service concluded that it was appropriate to seek legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) to clarify the Department's position in relation to such applications.

Local Government Boundary Commissioner

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the claim that the appointment of the Local Government Boundary Commissioner and Assistant Commissioners through the Commissioner for Public Appointments would increase the likelihood of any local government boundaries legislation gaining cross-party support.[R]

(AQW 2259/11)

Minister of the Environment: The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioners are not listed in the Commissioner for Public Appointments (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008, therefore, their appointment was not required to be carried out under the Commissioner for Public Appointments' monitored kitemark.

Their appointment, however, followed OFMdFM, Central Appointments Unit's Best Practice Guide and was based on merit, with independent assessment, openness, and transparency of process.

There is nothing to indicate that the appointments' process influenced cross-party support for any local government boundaries legislation.

Driver and Vehicle Agency

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the timetable for the recruitment of additional staff to the Driver and Vehicle Agency to (i) administer the new IT system for goods vehicle operators' licence applications; and (ii) enforce the new Goods Vehicles Operators' Licencing Scheme.

(AQW 2260/11)

Minister of the Environment: At this point in the process it is not known what the staffing requirements for the introduction and management of the IT system or the enforcement of the scheme will be. The Department is currently considering resource requirements to enable the new scheme to be effectively implemented, managed and enforced. The arrangements to allocate staff to the new functions will be considered in the context of the financial and staffing position in the Department at the time.

Planning Applications

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications (i) submitted and; (ii) approved by each divisional planning office, in each month, in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2301/11)

Minister of the Environment: I have attached for your information data obtained from my Department's records in relation to the number of planning applications (i) submitted and (ii) approved by each divisional planning office, in each month, in each of the last two years.

ANNEX 1 - AQW 2301/11 - PLANNING APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

TABLE 1A - PLANNING APPLICATIONS RECEIVED BY DIVISIONAL OFFICE 2008/09

Division	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Apr 2008	322	341	405	390	35	280	479	2252
May 2008	274	278	350	343	40	278	510	2073
Jun 2008	243	325	354	326	19	281	502	2050
Jul 2008	250	287	311	280	34	253	404	1819

Division	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Aug 2008	203	243	238	250	35	204	312	1485
Sept 2008	228	235	273	283	32	264	377	1692
Oct 2008	197	277	317	256	35	237	358	1677
Nov 2008	156	248	247	212	26	160	304	1353
Dec 2008	172	188	237	246	31	193	227	1294
Jan 2009	194	191	217	236	23	181	328	1370
Feb 2009	225	226	278	295	27	205	352	1608
Mar 2009	254	255	313	315	35	278	346	1796
Total	2718	3094	3540	3432	372	2814	4499	20469

TABLE 1B - PLANNING APPLICATIONS RECEIVED BY DIVISIONAL OFFICE 2009/10

Division	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Apr 2009	242	249	363	289	36	239	373	1791
May 2009	243	241	312	298	28	235	353	1710
Jun 2009	239	251	324	333	32	280	401	1860
Jul 2009	353	258	463	373	33	335	465	2280
Aug 2009	155	131	203	202	13	178	220	1102
Sept 2009	191	222	309	290	29	208	390	1639
Oct 2009	240	214	301	286	27	212	322	1602
Nov 2009	187	200	305	266	24	202	347	1531
Dec 2009	205	229	251	305	24	196	307	1517
Jan 2010	170	168	252	248	23	149	248	1258
Feb 2010	205	201	268	300	27	230	290	1521
Mar 2010	237	262	321	312	36	230	348	1746
Total	2667	2626	3672	3502	332	2694	4064	19557

TABLE 1C - PLANNING APPLICATIONS RECEIVED BY DIVISIONAL OFFICE 2010/11*

Division	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Apr 2010	211	213	287	264	49	198	308	1530
May 2010	200	216	311	279	43	207	283	1539
Jun 2010	211	184	353	327	42	227	366	1710
Total	622	613	951	870	134	632	957	4779

* Data not yet available for Quarter 2 of 2010/11 (scheduled for publication on 9 Dec 2010)

ANNEX 2 - AQW 2301/11 – PLANNING APPLICATIONS APPROVED**TABLE 2A - PLANNING APPLICATIONS APPROVED BY DIVISIONAL OFFICE 2008/09**

	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Apr 2008	243	297	370	331	16	316	601	2174
May 2008	325	301	431	307	25	287	428	2104
Jun 2008	252	325	496	321	16	308	463	2181
Jul 2008	276	230	450	297	11	272	491	2027
Aug 2008	227	246	340	257	11	238	401	1720
Sept 2008	300	352	400	342	20	264	564	2242
Oct 2008	282	266	378	375	21	246	421	1989
Nov 2008	212	240	298	366	18	296	461	1891
Dec 2008	298	212	329	337	25	232	414	1847
Jan 2009	219	249	373	303	11	245	303	1703
Feb 2009	159	246	265	298	23	229	400	1620
Mar 2009	261	259	308	310	34	213	328	1713
Total	3054	3223	4438	3844	231	3146	5275	23211

TABLE 2A - PLANNING APPLICATIONS APPROVED BY DIVISIONAL OFFICE 2009/10

	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Apr 2009	248	267	290	260	18	175	287	1545
May 2009	260	249	269	296	22	198	318	1612

	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Jun 2009	284	266	392	321	21	253	409	1946
Jul 2009	227	175	253	267	26	189	380	1517
Aug 2009	231	219	272	285	26	195	274	1502
Sept 2009	278	240	314	215	23	194	386	1650
Oct 2009	231	210	260	341	23	230	400	1695
Nov 2009	207	195	305	307	18	227	370	1629
Dec 2009	197	196	265	299	22	159	341	1479
Jan 2010	193	142	231	231	18	227	306	1348
Feb 2010	236	227	239	220	34	186	329	1471
Mar 2010	263	218	307	318	19	187	310	1622
Total	2855	2604	3397	3360	270	2420	4110	19016

TABLE 2C - PLANNING APPLICATIONS APPROVED BY DIVISIONAL OFFICE 2010/11*

	Ballymena	Belfast	Craigavon	Downpatrick	HQ	Northern	Omagh	Total
Apr 2010	179	181	288	235	19	187	265	1354
May 2010	178	159	218	297	14	182	250	1298
Jun 2010	194	229	329	297	29	196	337	1611
Total	551	569	835	829	62	565	852	4263

* Data not yet available for Quarter 2 of 2010/11 (scheduled for publication on 9 Dec 2010)

Driver and Vehicle Agency

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any computer system breakdowns which have occurred in the Driver and Vehicle Agency in the last three months.

(AQW 2302/11)

Minister of the Environment: There are a number of major Information Technology systems which DVA uses:

1. "MOT" is a system contracted out to provide the testing function in each of the MOT test centres. There were 8 occasions where testing was unavailable in various test centres and 3 occasions when results failed to be sent back to the system meaning retests could not be booked.
2. "BSP" is the electronic system used to book appointments. There were 2 occasions when the internet booking service was unavailable.
3. "NIDLS" is the driver license system. There were 8 occasions of system downtime relating to the printer used for driving licenses and 2 occasions where network issues caused a problem.
4. "FABS" is the Freight and Bus system. There was 1 occasion caused by a system error.

5. "TRADS" is a system used to check car insurance details. The system was unavailable on 10 occasions, 6 of which were server problems and 4 were caused by network issues.

In all cases system failure impact on business was minimised and business continuity measures were employed.

Graduate Internship Programmes

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2324/11)

Minister of the Environment:

2010/11 Year

- (i) DOE has facilitated one internship request in 2010/11 and intends to continue to support this student in the year 2011/12.
- (ii) The Department is currently considering two further applications for 2010/11 year and every reasonable effort will be made to facilitate these students.

2011/12 Year

- (iii) The two internships mentioned at (ii) above, if facilitated, may continue into the 2011/12 year.

Any further requests for both 2010/11 and 2011/12 years will be considered and facilitated where possible.

New Planning Reform Legislation

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the reasons for the delay in publishing new planning reform legislation, as set out in the Programme for Government; and whether there is enough time to complete this commitment before the end of this Assembly mandate.

(AQW 2353/11)

Minister of the Environment: The current PSA target is to "Bring forward legislation to further reform the planning system by March 2011 and further streamline administrative processes and improve customer service by March 2011".

I have submitted the Planning Bill to the Speaker and hope that it can be introduced in the very near future. I and my officials are committed to working closely with the Environment Committee to facilitate its formal scrutiny and report so that the Assembly can be given the opportunity to scrutinise and pass the Bill before dissolution.

Felling of Trees

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of prosecutions for the felling of trees covered by Tree Preservation Orders in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2367/11)

Minister of the Environment: My Department is committed to maintaining up-to-date and accurate case records and to this end its existing Enforcement IT system was upgraded in 2009.

During the 2009/10 business year, three investigations in relation to the cutting down, uprooting or wilfully destroying a tree, or wilfully damaging, topping or lopping a tree protected by a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) resulted in prosecutions.

Prior to 2009, Planning Service did not retain full electronic records for Enforcement therefore, in order to provide you with accurate information for the time period in question; a manual check of case files

would be required. This is not only disproportionate in terms of time and cost but would result in unvalidated statistics being released.

Felling of Trees

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment, for each of the last five years, to detail any enforcement action that has been taken, other than prosecution, for the felling of trees that are covered by Tree Preservation Orders.

(AQW 2372/11)

Minister of the Environment: My Department is committed to maintaining up-to-date and accurate case records and to this end its existing Enforcement IT system was upgraded in 2009.

During the 2009/10 business year, one case relating to the cutting down, uprooting or wilfully destroying a tree, or wilfully damaging, topping or lopping a tree protected by a Tree Preservation Order (TPO), involved the service of a Notice in accordance with Article 82(1) of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 as amended which requires the replanting of any destroyed or damaged trees.

Prior to 2009, Planning Service did not retain full electronic records for Enforcement therefore, in order to provide you with accurate information for the time period in question, a manual check of case files would be required. This is not only disproportionate in terms of time and cost but would result in unvalidated statistics being released.

Land Owned by Each Local Council

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment to list the land owned by each local council and to give details of its current use.

(AQW 2420/11)

Minister of the Environment: The information requested is not held centrally by my Department but may be available from any individual council in which you have an interest.

Twinning of Towns, Villages and Cities

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost, incurred by each local council, in each of the last five years, of (i) travel; (ii) accommodation; (iii) meals; and (iv) any other expenses, when twinning with European villages, towns and cities.

(AQW 2481/11)

Minister of the Environment: The information requested is not held centrally by my Department and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

The information may be available from each individual council if you have an interest in any particular council and its links with other European areas.

Twinning of Towns, Villages and Cities

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment to list (i) the villages, towns and cities that are twinned and the village, town or city with which each is twinned; and (ii) the date each twinning was agreed.

(AQW 2482/11)

Minister of the Environment: The information requested is not held centrally by my Department and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

The information may be available from each individual council if you have an interest in any particular council and its links with other European areas.

Planning Applications

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to provide a planning application renewal exemption for developers who have planning approvals that are soon to expire, but have not yet commenced construction due to the downturn in the housing market.

(AQW 2485/11)

Minister of the Environment: My Department recognises the financial difficulties experienced by developers at this time and the fact that they may not be in a position to develop a site for which they have been granted planning permission.

Under current planning legislation developers who wish to delay the commencement of development may choose to apply for renewal of planning permission as the time limit for implementation of the planning approval approaches.

Developers who do not wish to apply for renewal of planning permission do have the opportunity to commence development on the site in order to implement the planning permission and prevent the permission from lapsing. To assist and provide clarification, my officials have published guidance on this issue 'Guidance on Renewing Planning Permission and Starting Development' which is available to view at the Planning Service website. This guidance includes useful examples of when my Department would accept that development has commenced in accordance with the approved planning permission.

A renewal exemption due to the downturn in the housing market is not available under the current planning legislation and I have no plans to amend the legislation at this time to introduce one. I am content that the current legislation provides sufficient opportunities to renew planning permission or commence development within the required period.

Road Safety Committees

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the decline in the number of road safety committees.[R]

(AQO 637/11)

Minister of the Environment: Road safety committees are affiliated to the Road Safety Council and as an independent and voluntary organisation the future of the RSC and its local committees is very much in their own hands.

We have had limited contact with local road safety committees since 1 April 2010 when the Department introduced a new funding model which allows us to engage with the wider voluntary and community sector. As such the Department is not in a position to confirm the status of the committees that were in receipt of direct funding prior to 1 April 2010, or if new committees have been established.

Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the John Lewis planning application.
(AQO 638/11)

Minister of the Environment: I will no longer take any part in the decision making process or play any part in the consideration and decision making with regard to the subject planning application.

I have assigned all functions of the Department to Leo O'Reilly, Permanent Secretary of the Department of the Environment, in connection with the processing, administration and determination of the application.

The Judicial Review of the application has been withdrawn.

The Permanent Secretary will write to the Member about this matter in the near future.

Goods Vehicle Licensing

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment how many additional staff will be required to administer the new IT system for goods vehicles operators' licence applications and to enforce the new Goods Vehicles Operators' Licensing Scheme.

(AQO 636/11)

Minister of the Environment: At this point in the process it is not known what the staffing requirement for the introduction and management of the IT system or the enforcement of the scheme will be. The Department is currently considering resource requirements to enable the new scheme to be effectively implemented, managed and enforced.

Planning

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the consistency in decision-making across planning divisional offices, particularly in relation to PPS 21.

(AQO 643/11)

Minister of the Environment: I take the issue of consistency in decision making in relation to planning policy very seriously.

My officials in Planning Policy Division and at Planning Service Headquarters have provided advice and guidance to staff in Divisional Planning Offices on the application and interpretation of new policy, particularly in relation to the significant amendments to the final published version of PPS 21.

There is an established forum – the Development Management Working Group – where each Divisional Office is represented and where matters of policy interpretation are raised and agreed to ensure a consistent approach.

Elected representatives also raise matters of policy interpretation with me directly and I have recently clarified a number of issues in relation to PPS 21 and the second addendum to PPS 7.

Finally the development management process is subject to regular audit to ensure files are processed properly in line with legislative requirements and that proper decision making procedures are followed.

Footpaths

Mrs C McGill asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has held with local councils and the Department for Regional Development about a joined-up approach to the gritting of footpaths.

(AQO 644/11)

Minister of the Environment: I have had no discussions with either the local councils or the Department for Regional Development about a joined-up approach to the gritting of footpaths.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Bonuses

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many staff in his Department received bonuses for work carried out in relation to HR Connect in each of the last five years, broken down by grade; and what were the business reasons for the bonuses.

(AQW 2197/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The attached tables record the number of staff in DFP who received bonus payments outside the normal pay system exclusively for work in relation to HR Connect.

2005/06 - NIL**2006/07 - NIL****2007/08**

Grade	Reason	
	Support	Contract
AA and analogous	7	
AO and analogous	22	
EOII and analogous	11	
EOI and analogous	7	
SO and analogous	12	
DP and analogous	14	2
Grade 7 and analogous	2	2
Grade 6 and analogous		2
SCS		

2008/09

Grade	Reason	
	Support	Contract
AA and analogous		
AO and analogous		
EOII and analogous	1	
EOI and analogous	2	
SO and analogous		
DP and analogous	1	
Grade 7 and analogous		
Grade 6 and analogous	1	
SCS		

2009/10

Grade	Reason	
	Support	Contract
AA and analogous		
AO and analogous	1	1
EOII and analogous	2	2
EOI and analogous	2	
SO and analogous	4	1

Grade	Reason	
	Support	Contract
DP and analogous	2	1
Grade 7 and analogous		3
Grade 6 and analogous		1
SCS		

HR Connect

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, since HR Connect became operational, in how many instances, when an overpayment has occurred, did HR Connect not follow the process for the recovery of overpayments.

(AQW 2266/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The HRConnect payroll service became operational in November 2008. The complete and accurate recovery of overpayments is measured and reported on a monthly basis as one of the agreed Service Measures for the payroll service.

Since September 2009 this Service Measure has been achieved 100%. Prior to September 2009 the overpayment procedures were still being developed and embedded and the Service Measure was not measured during that period.

Suicide

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people in each constituency have died as a result of suicide in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2404/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table attached gives the number of deaths registered due to either 'suicide and self-inflicted injury'¹ or 'undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted'² by Parliamentary Constituency that the deceased was resident in for each year between 2005 and 2009.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes X60-X84, Y87.0

² International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes Y10-Y34, Y87.2

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF REGISTERED DEATHS DUE TO 'SUICIDE AND SELF-INFLICTED INJURY' AND 'UNDETERMINED INJURY WHETHER ACCIDENTALLY OR PURPOSEFULLY INFLICTED' BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY OF THE DECEASED, 2005-2009.

Area	Registration Year				
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast East	9	9	14	10	11
Belfast North	16	24	20	25	23
Belfast South	15	16	13	14	12
Belfast West	11	22	22	29	26
East Antrim	8	12	14	12	10
East Londonderry	4	11	11	14	15

Area	Registration Year				
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	19	16	18	12	19
Foyle	12	28	14	20	18
Lagan Valley	15	14	4	10	8
Mid Ulster	20	20	12	15	14
Newry and Armagh	15	17	19	31	18
North Antrim	9	17	8	10	12
North Down	7	4	8	10	9
South Antrim	12	14	9	11	12
South Down	14	20	13	16	6
Strangford	11	11	10	7	13
Upper Bann	10	12	18	15	16
West Tyrone	6	23	15	21	17
Unknown	-	1	-	-	1
Northern Ireland	213	291	242	282	260

Student Support Fund 2010-11

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when his department will transfer monies for the Student Support Fund 2010/11 to the Department for Employment and Learning.

(AQW 2428/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The closure of the student rate relief scheme was agreed to in July 2009 by the Northern Ireland Executive. At that time the Executive also agreed to protect existing claimants so long as their household circumstances remained the same.

In terms of redirecting savings achieved, the Executive were advised that supplementing the Universities' Student Support funds was the favoured option with savings redirected as and when they occurred. This was always going to take time, particularly as the closure of the scheme to new applicants led to a late, though anticipated, surge in applications in the preceding weeks.

Land and Property Services, who administer the remnants of the rates scheme, have recently reviewed the entitlement of all claimants and the majority of them are now expected to leave the scheme because of household changes, resulting in a sizeable amount of savings from the scheme.

It is my understanding that officials in DEL have now submitted the business case to DFP to allow such savings to be redirected. Following approval of the business case actual savings can flow from DFP to DEL as and when they occur.

Irish Language Classes for Staff

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his Department currently offers, or plans to offer, Irish language classes to staff.

(AQW 2545/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: No.

Government: Revenue

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what revenue-raising options his Department and the Executive are considering.

(AQO 655/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: A number of revenue raising options are being considered by the Budget Review Group as part of the budget process.

The options being considered cover a wide array of issues in a number of departments. Ministers are now considering the practicalities of pursuing these options. These practicalities include if the proposals are deliverable and, if so, the timescale involved in the implementation.

There is no point in announcing a revenue raising policy if it is not within the Executive's power to implement or if it will have an adverse impact on areas we would wish to protect.

It is therefore important that the Budget Review Group be allowed to consider these ideas in full before bringing forward their proposals.

Rates: Debt

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to ensure the maximum recovery of ratepayer debt from previous financial years by 1 April 2011.

(AQO 650/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The period of rating reforms and related IT system replacements led to an increase in ratepayer debt in recent years; the recent economic situation has also increased the difficulty many ratepayers have in paying monies due.

Land & Property Services continues to pursue all unpaid rates, whilst recognising the genuine financial difficulties of many ratepayers. The Agency seeks to agree payment arrangements with ratepayers where possible, and to ensure that all ratepayers are claiming all the benefits and reliefs that they are due. Multi-year payment arrangements leave debt on the books in the short-term; but the alternative is to take ratepayers suffering genuine hardship through a legal recovery process. LPS staff have to make such decisions on a daily basis.

Where a payment arrangement is not agreed by the ratepayer, LPS uses legal recovery processes, ultimately lodging unpaid debts with the Enforcement of Judgements Office, or seeking an order declaring the ratepayer bankrupt. This is vital work if we are to ensure that the rating system is fair, and each of us pays our share of the cost of running Northern Ireland. LPS is therefore discussing more interventionist enforcement activity with EJO, and is considering options such as the use of private sector debt collectors. Those ratepayers who are not paying their rates are likely to receive a knock on the door, a phone call, or further letters.

LPS is currently making solid progress in taking forward cases of unpaid rates. At 31 October, the Agency's work had reduced the £157 million total prior year ratepayer debt to £102 million, and had secured 10,801 court decrees, an increase of 17% on the same date last year.

Republic of Ireland: European Financial Stability Facility

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact that any bail-out for the Republic of Ireland under the European Financial Stability Fund might have on Northern Ireland.

(AQO 652/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Northern Ireland has strong economic links with the Republic of Ireland. They are our largest trading partner accounting for approximately 30% of our exports. Therefore a strong and growing Irish economy is very much in our interests. In that context I welcome the support package agreed with the EU and IMF on the 28th November 2010.

However, I am concerned about the potential impact on local Irish owned banks. We don't yet know the fine detail of how the EU – IMF Programme will be implemented, it is clear that a fundamental downsizing and reorganisation of the Irish banking sector is required. This could lead to job losses in the Irish owned banks here – Bank of Ireland (UK) and First Trust - and impact on lending in Northern Ireland.

Finally, the austerity measures announced by the Irish Government will undoubtedly lead to falling demand in the Irish market. This could adversely affect our sales to the Republic and their ability to travel to Northern Ireland to shop.

Civil Service: Pay

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of whether the 5 per cent pay rise being sought for Civil Service staff might lead to job losses if it was awarded.

(AQO 653/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: A 5 per cent pay rise would create additional pressures on departmental budgets and when taken together with the budget reductions announced as part of 2010 spending review I expect that civil service workforce numbers would have to fall. Every effort however will be made to manage any necessary workforce reductions without the need for redundancies, but it seems inevitable that the NICS will face significant post reductions in the coming years.

Inflation

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what scope he envisages to control inflation in Executive expenditure over the next four years.

(AQO 654/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Northern Ireland essentially received a flat cash settlement in terms of current expenditure in the Spending Review. In real terms, this means we are facing a reduction in our Departmental Expenditure Limit of 8 per cent by the end of 2014-15. Therefore controlling inflation will be important as we seek to maintain public services.

Public sector pay accounts for around half of all current expenditure in Northern Ireland and that is the one area where we have greatest scope to control inflation. That is why earlier this year I announced a two-year public sector pay freeze unless contractual commitments apply.

Unfortunately, we have limited ability to control other external sources of inflation such as energy costs. However, I have no doubt that further efficiency savings are possible which could help offset these inflationary pressures. Therefore, I have asked Departments to produce savings plans as part of the Budget process.

Banks

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel which banks he has met over the last six months.

(AQO 656/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Earlier this year my officials met with representatives of each of our four main local banks on my behalf to discuss the perceived lack of credit available for businesses. More recently, I have personally met with representatives from Santander UK, while my officials met with Citibank.

I am also meeting the British Bankers Association and the banks together with Business Alliance representatives in early December to discuss the recent Task force report from the BBA. It outlines 17 action points to improve the relationship between banks and their customers and I pressing for these to be implemented in Northern Ireland as soon as possible

Student Finance

Mrs C McGill asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the money saved by the abolition of rates relief for students will be redirected to the Department for Employment and Learning for Student Support.

(AQO 657/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The closure of the student rate relief scheme was agreed to in July 2009 by the Northern Ireland Executive. At that time the Executive also agreed to protect existing claimants so long as their household circumstances remained the same.

In terms of redirecting savings achieved, the Executive were advised that supplementing the Universities' Student Support funds was the favoured option with savings redirected as and when they occurred. This was always going to take time, particularly as the closure of the scheme to new applicants led to a late, though anticipated, surge in applications in the preceding weeks.

Land and Property Services, who administer the remnants of the rates scheme, have recently reviewed the entitlement of all claimants and the majority of them are now expected to leave the scheme because of household changes, resulting in a sizeable amount of savings from the scheme.

It is my understanding that officials in DEL have now submitted the business case to DFP to allow such savings to be redirected. Following approval of the business case actual savings can flow from DFP to DEL as and when they occur.

Budget 2010-11

Mr S Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on preparations for the draft budget.

(AQO 658/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member will be aware that, I have been urging the Executive to agree a draft Budget. It is now essential this is done as soon as possible to ensure there is adequate time for public consultation before agreeing the final Budget at the end of January/beginning of February. It is important that the final Budget is agreed by this date to provide departments and their arm's length bodies with the certainty they require to plan effectively for the coming financial year.

I brought an initial paper to the Executive in mid September outlining my planning assumptions for Budget 2010. This was the subject of a useful discussion at the Executive meeting on 23 September.

Following the Spending Review announcement on 20 October, I presented a paper to the Budget Review Group on 4 November 2010 which included an initial draft Budget scenario. Bilateral meetings are currently being conducted which will allow me to gather the views of other Ministers on the impact of the proposed allocations to their departments.

The Budget Review Group continues to meet on a regular basis to discuss the draft Budget. These discussions include issues such as revenue raising proposals.

Once these discussions have been completed I will bring a draft Budget paper to the Executive.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he can give an assurance that the interests of the Presbyterian Mutual Society savers will not be adversely affected by the current budget negotiations.

(AQO 659/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Executive and Assembly approval of our Budget will be needed before the proposed solution to the PMS situation can go ahead.

The Spending Review announced on 20 October confirmed that the Executive would have the spending power necessary to meet the UK Government's contribution to both the Loan and Mutual Access Fund

elements of the proposed PMS solution in the 2011-12 financial year. This money is specifically for the purpose of PMS but as it will flow through the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment the Executive must formally approve this allocation to them as part of the process of agreeing our own Budget. The Assembly will subsequently have to approve this in order to provide legislative authority for the expenditure.

DETI have made a bid in the budget 2010 process for £25 million in respect of the Northern Ireland Executive's contribution to the Mutual Access Fund. Confirmation of this is subject to agreement of the Budget by the Executive. The Assembly will again have to provide legislative authority for the expenditure.

My hope is that a Budget will be agreed in the near future.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mental Health Patients

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many mental health patients are currently treated as (i) in-patients; and (ii) out-patients and receiving care in the community.

(AQW 2107/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): At 17 February 2010 (latest available), 1,067 patients were being treated as inpatients in mental health hospitals in Northern Ireland.

Information on the number of mental health patients being treated as outpatients and receiving care in the community is not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Budget Allocation

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in the last financial year available, what proportion of his budget was spent on (i) health care; (ii) social services and (iii) public safety.

(AQW 2108/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The last complete financial year for which the information requested is available is 2009-10. The proportions of the budget spent by my Department on health, social services and public safety in 2009/10 were:

DEL Final Outturn %s 2009/10	Health	Social Services	Public Safety	Total
Revenue	79%	19%	2%	100%
Capital	93%	4%	3%	100%

Consultants and General Practitioners' Earnings

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the maximum amount that (i) a consultant; and (ii) a general practitioner can earn from the Health Service per annum; and how many people earned the maximum amount in the last available financial year.

(AQW 2109/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The maximum basic salary for a consultant is £100,446 per annum. 159 consultants are at the maximum point on the salary scale.

- (ii) As the GMS Contract is a contract for services with a GP Practice, it is for a GP to decide how much to draw out by way of earnings and practice expenses. It is therefore not possible to provide information on the maximum amount a GP can earn from health service work per annum.

Car Parking Charges

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much revenue has been raised from car parking charges on Health Service property in each of the last three years; and how much of this revenue went back into the Health Service.

(AQW 2110/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Altnagelvin Hospital	£124,000	£131,000	£123,000
Belfast City Hospital	£891,000	£874,000	£883,000
Craigavon Hospital	Nil	Nil	£ 200,000*
Mater Hospital	£86,000	£79,000	£67,000
Ulster Hospital	£ 820,000	£1,057,000	£1,071,000
Totals	£1,921,000	£2,141,000	£2,344,000

* Craigavon started charging in August 2009.

All revenue listed is shown gross and has gone back into the Health Service.

The revenue raised on the Royal Victoria Hospital site is excluded as revenue raised is retained by the PFI contractor under the terms of the contract.

Prescriptions for Antidepressant Drugs

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many prescriptions for anti-depressant drugs were issued and dispensed in each of the last three years; and what was the cost to the Health Service in each year.

(AQW 2112/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of prescription items for anti-depressants for which a prescription was written, dispensed by a community pharmacist, and presented for payment in each of the last three years is shown in the table below.

The ingredient cost before discount is also shown in the table below, this is the basic cost of the drug before the application of the sliding discount scale. The ingredient cost does not include other costs to the health service such as dispensing fees and other payments.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PRESCRIPTION ITEMS FOR ANTI-DEPRESSANTS DISPENSED, AND INGREDIENT COST BEFORE DISCOUNT 2007/08 – 2009/10.

	Number of Prescription items	Ingredient Cost Before Discount
2007/2008	1,544,644	£18.7m
2008/2009	1,618,261	£17.5m
2009/2010	1,765,847	£17.9m

Source: Family Practitioner Services, Information and Registration Unit - HSC Business Services Organisation.

Notes:

- 1 The ingredient cost shown is the ingredient cost before the application of the sliding discount scale with the exception of the drugs classified in part 1 of the Drug Tariff. For these items it is the ingredient cost after discount.
- 2 BSO prescribing data extract for Antidepressants as classified as BNF Chapter 4, Section 3.
- 3 Information relates to prescriptions dispensed April to March.
- 4 Figures exclude private prescriptions and prescriptions for anti-depressants written and dispensed in secondary care.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have (i) been diagnosed with; and (ii) died from C difficile in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust since the launch of the public inquiry into the outbreak of the infection in the Trust.

(AQW 2115/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 31 March 2009 I launched the public inquiry into the outbreak of the Clostridium Difficile infection in the Northern Health & Social Care Trust.

- i) Between 1 April 2009 and 15 November 2010, 331 patients have been diagnosed with Clostridium difficile in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. Of these, 209 patients have been diagnosed during an inpatient episode and 122 diagnosed within a community setting. Information reported for the community includes those diagnosed by a General Practitioner and those diagnosed during an Accident and Emergency attendance (since 12 November 2009); and,
- ii) Provisional information indicates that between 1 April 2009 and 30 September 2010, 11 deaths were registered in Northern Ireland where Clostridium difficile was recorded as the underlying or main cause of death in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many suspected cases of C difficile have been reported in children under the age of 2 years old in each Health and Social Care Trust in (i) 2007/08; (ii) 2008/09; and (iii) 2009/10.

(AQW 2116/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust's Day Surgery Rate

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's day surgery rate currently stands at 47 per cent which is a reduction of 6 per cent since March 2010, what action is being taken to ensure the Trust meets its target rate of 72 per cent by March 2011.

(AQW 2117/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Responsibility for meeting the targets in its Trust Delivery Plan lies with the Northern Trust. The Trust has advised me that it remains fully committed to improving day case rates in a safe and sustainable manner and is taking steps to specifically achieve improvements in this area.

Children Suspected of having an Autism Spectrum Disorder

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current average waiting time between referral and assessment for children suspected of having an autism spectrum disorder.

(AQW 2126/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Figures are not available in the format requested.

Urology Services at the Causeway Hospital

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to withdraw urology services from the Causeway Hospital; and whether his Department or the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has consulted any party about the potential withdrawal of urology services from the Causeway Hospital.

(AQW 2163/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans to withdraw Urology Services from the Causeway Hospital; the current configuration of seven beds will remain in Causeway for minor and intermediate cases and all other outpatient, diagnostic and elective admissions and services will continue to be based in Causeway.

Cancer Detection and Survival Rates

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how cancer (i) detection; and (ii) survival rates compare with the rest of the UK.

(AQW 2176/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) The latest comparable incidence¹ rates for NI and the UK are set out in table 1 below.

TABLE 1 - INCIDENCE RATES OF ALL CANCERS EXCLUDING NON-MELANOMA SKIN CANCER (ICD-10* C00-C97 EXCL. C44) DIAGNOSED IN 2007 IN N. IRELAND AND THE UK

Country	Incidence rate** (per 100,000)
N. Ireland	397.4
UK	377.0

1 Incidence is the number of new cases diagnosed within a specified time period.

* For a listing and explanation of ICD-10 codes see International Classification of Diseases for Oncology, 3rd Edition, World Health Organisation, Geneva, 2000. For an explanation of ICD-10 codes see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ICD-10_codes.

** incidence rate has been age-standardised to the Standard European Population.

(ii) Comparable five year relative survival rates for all cancers (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) between the UK constituent countries is presented in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2 - 5-YEAR RELATIVE SURVIVAL RATE OF PATIENTS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER EXCLUDING NON-MELANOMA SKIN CANCER (ICD-10* C00-C97 EXCL. C44) BETWEEN 1995-99

Country	Relative survival** (95% confidence interval)
N. Ireland	44.6 (44.0–45.3)
England	46.2 (46.1–46.4)
Scotland	43.0 (42.7–43.4)
Wales	48.4 (47.9–48.9)

* For a listing and explanation of ICD-10 codes see International Classification of Diseases for Oncology, 3rd Edition, World Health Organisation, Geneva, 2000. For an explanation of ICD-10 codes see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ICD-10_codes.

- **** Relative survival is an analysis that adjusts for the background population mortality in the different countries as well as adjusting for age distribution differences between countries. For more details on the source of these statistics and methodology see: The EUROCare-4 database on cancer survival in Europe: De Angelis, R et al., 2009. Data standardisation, quality control and methods of statistical analysis. European Journal of Cancer 45:909-930

This information was provided by the NI Cancer registry and is the most up-to-date available

Radiographers

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to detail the number of radiographers currently employed in Health and Social Care Trusts under (a) a permanent contract; and (b) a temporary contract; (ii) the length of each temporary contract; and (iii) what plans he has to make these temporary contracts permanent.

(AQW 2189/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) (a) The number of radiographers employed under permanent contracts is given in the table below.

NUMBER OF RADIOGRAPHERS EMPLOYED UNDER PERMANENT CONTRACTS BY TRUST AS AT NOVEMBER 2010

HSC Trust	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	296	268.58
Northern	118	97.19
South Eastern	101	85.19
Southern	105	92.67
Western	107	99.89
Total	727	643.52

Source: NI HSC Trusts

- (i) (b) The number of radiographers employed under temporary contracts is given in the table below.

NUMBER OF RADIOGRAPHERS EMPLOYED UNDER TEMPORARY CONTRACTS AS AT NOVEMBER 2010

Trust	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	7	6.92
Northern	7	7.00
South Eastern, Southern, Western	9	9.00
Total	23	22.92

Source: NI HSC Trusts

Note: Some counts have been combined in order to minimise the risk of personal disclosure, where it may be possible to identify an individual from the data provided.

- (i) (b) (ii) We cannot provide each length of contract as this would be to disclose individual information, however these temporary contracts range from 1 month to 25 months.
- (iii) It is not the Minister's responsibility to determine staffing levels within Trusts. Trusts decide on their own staffing levels for both permanent and temporary contracts as required by the individual Trust.

Patient and Client Council and the Regulatory and Quality Improvement Authority: Funding

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding provided by his Department to the (i) Patient and Client Council; and (ii) Regulatory and Quality Improvement Authority, in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2195/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The funding allocated by my Department to these bodies over the last 2 years was as follows:

Patient and Client Council	2009/10 £k	2008/09 £k
revenue	1,548	n/a
capital	0	

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority	2009/10 £k	2008/09 £k
revenue	5,952	5,523
capital	133	50

The Patient and Client Council came into being on 1 April 2009.

Food Standards Agency

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact that the reorganisation of the Food Standards Agency will have on the centralised support available to the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2200/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As a result of the change in remit of the FSA in England, those staff responsible for nutrition policy have transferred to the Department of Health and those staff responsible for non-safety related food composition and labelling have transferred to the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Staff from the FSA in NI who retain responsibility for these policy areas are now establishing relationships with staff in the relevant English Government Departments. It is still too early to establish whether or not an equivalent level of policy development support and technical expert advice will be available in the future. I will be maintaining contact with the FSA to ensure that Northern Ireland continues to have the ability to provide an appropriate level of public health protection for our citizens.

Lung Surgery Beds and Anaesthetists

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact on waiting times of the reduction across hospitals in the number of lung surgery beds and anaesthetists.

(AQW 2206/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The delivery of these services is a matter for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust as the regional service provider.

I am not aware of any reduction within Belfast of consultant anaesthetist staffing associated with thoracic surgery or in the number of lung surgery beds.

The Belfast Trust has advised that they will continue to make available additional beds for thoracic surgery including beds for lung cancer patients as and when they are needed.

The Trust continues to work to meet access targets in respect of elective waiting times for thoracic surgery. The Trust also continues to manage patients in line with my Department's access targets for diagnosis and commencement of treatment for those with cancer.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2220/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department is keenly aware of the importance of legislation in this arena and will keep it central to its thinking in relation to Budget 2010. The impact on Section 75 groups and the most vulnerable in our society continues to be of prime importance and this will not change as a result of the emerging budget settlement. My bids included a summary high level impact assessment. In essence these show that, in general, a decision to spend more on health and social care helps people in section 75 groups – older people, people with a disability and younger people - because their need for health and social care is generally greater than the general population of average age. The converse is also true.

At this stage of the planning process, we do not know the level of the Budget 2010 reductions that will be made to the Department's budget. However, once this information is available, we can begin to model more clearly how the actual funding allocated can/should be spent and begin to assess the impact of those decisions in terms of the Section 75 groups. Best practice dictates that Equality Impact Assessments should be completed as part of the public consultation exercise that will be undertaken if savings delivery plans are necessary. This will allow an informed discussion on any potential impact there may be on section 75 groups

Employment Levels

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff are currently employed in (i) the Patient and Client Council; and (ii) the Regulatory and Quality Improvement Authority.

(AQW 2235/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on staffing levels within both the Patient Client Council and the Regulatory and Quality Improvement Authority can be found in the latest Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Key Facts Workforce Bulletin at 30th September 2010, which is on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/key_facts_workforce_bulletin_sept_2010_web_template.pdf

Royal Victoria Hospital: Car Parking

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he plans to take to alleviate the car parking problems and resulting queues of traffic at the Royal Victoria Hospital car park in Belfast.

(AQW 2244/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A temporary car park will be completed soon on the Broadway site. This will accommodate an additional 230 spaces. It is the intention that staff will be relocated from the main car park which will, in turn, make more space available for patients and visitors in the main car park.

Cystic Fibrosis

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) children; and (ii) adults are currently diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis.

(AQW 2271/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2008, there were 230 children recorded on the Cystic Fibrosis register as receiving treatment in Northern Ireland.

Similarly, there were 192 adults recorded on the Cystic Fibrosis register as receiving treatment in Northern Ireland in 2008.

Mental Illness and Personality Disorders Among Prisoners

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what resources are available to address the high levels of mental illness and personality disorders among prisoners.

(AQO 629/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has responsibility for the delivery of prison healthcare services. The Trust advises that £1.05m is currently spent on the provision of mental health services to prisons. Twenty one staff and two consultants (part time) provide this service.

Student Bursaries

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why local students studying in England for a degree in Social Care do not receive the same bursary as students from England and Wales who study the same subject here.

(AQW 2495/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The DHSSPS Student Incentive Scheme provides support to all students domiciled in Northern Ireland who study social work at undergraduate level here. It is not available for students from NI who choose to study elsewhere in the UK although they are eligible to apply for a Student Loan from their relevant Education and Library Board.

Rationale for the Scheme was based on evidence produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Department of Employment and Learning (DEL), showing that more than 70% of students funded to study outside Northern Ireland did not return to Northern Ireland to work. By contrast, the majority of local graduates remained in Northern Ireland.

Other countries in the UK have their own funding schemes for the Degree in Social Work.

Agenda for Change Review

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 658/11, when the Agenda for Change review outcome for auxiliary nurses in the Ulster Hospital Accident and Emergency Unit will be known.

(AQW 2511/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Management at the South Eastern Trust have advised me that the Trust had originally anticipated having these reviews completed within a four week period. However, there have been further issues raised at the consistency checking stage of the process. The Trust is currently addressing these issues with both the manager and staff concerned.

We all appreciate that this has been a lengthy and drawn out process, which I would wish to see concluded as quickly as possible. However, it is important that this particular case is dealt with in line with the agreed process.

Department of Justice

Domestic Violence

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of arrests for common or aggravated assault, or similar offences, of a partner in the context of domestic violence, in each of the last five years; and (ii) of these, how many people were (a) prosecuted; (b) convicted.

(AQW 2147/11)

Minister of Justice (Mr D Ford): The information is not available in the format requested. Data on arrests, prosecutions and convictions do not specify the relationship between the parties involved.

Human Trafficking

Mr P Frew asked the Minister of Justice, for each of the last ten years, to detail (i) the number of people who have been victims of human trafficking, in and through, Northern Ireland; (ii) the number of people convicted for human trafficking or similar offences; and (iii) what measures he plans to put in place to counter this crime.

(AQW 2229/11)

Minister of Justice: The information is not recorded in the manner requested. However, I can advise the following:

Prior to 2007 there was no significant awareness of human trafficking into Northern Ireland. In 2007/08 local law enforcement agencies participated in Pentameter 2, a UK wide operation focussing on human trafficking, which led to a small number of victims being recovered locally.

- In 2008/2009, the PSNI recovered 11 potential victims of human trafficking;
- In 2009/2010, the PSNI recovered 25 potential victims of human trafficking; and
- Recent figures provided by the UK Human Trafficking Centre confirm that between 1 January 2010 and 31 August 2010 the PSNI have made 13 referrals to the National Referral Mechanism. This includes 5 persons under 18 and 8 adults who are reported to have been subjected to either sexual or labour exploitation.

A number of other cases have also been pursued through the Criminal Justice system as follows:

On 4 February 2010, Thomas Carroll and Shamelia Clark pleaded guilty to conspiracy to control prostitution for gain and conspiracy to money launder. Toma Carroll pleaded guilty to conspiracy to money launder. They were sentenced to seven years, three and a half years and two years respectively.

The Trafficking charges against the three defendants were not taken to trial on the basis that the maximum sentence for trafficking (14 years) is the same as that for money laundering.

This prosecution followed a proactive and complex investigation by PSNI, An Garda Síochána and the Serious Organised Crime Agency.

One further case of human trafficking for sexual exploitation is presently awaiting a date for trial and a case of human trafficking for labour exploitation is presently awaiting direction from the Public Prosecution Service.

In terms of the measures in place to counter trafficking, the PSNI has proactively sought to develop trust and develop good working relationships with a wide range of organisations and community representatives, who may, within their respective roles, come into contact with victims of human trafficking. This has led directly to the identification of victims of human trafficking and the commencement of investigations.

All potential victims are invited to accompany officers to a place of safety and, following an initial interview, are referred to a competent authority through the National Referral Mechanism. If victim status is granted, the victim will receive access to the appropriate support services and enter a 45 day

reflection period to aid their recovery from their ordeal and to consider whether they wish to cooperate with a police investigation.

PSNI Organised Crime Branch has conducted a number of major proactive operations against trafficking. The first priority in such investigations is the rescue of any suspected or potential victims. There have been eight persons arrested in Northern Ireland this year on suspicion of involvement in Human Trafficking, three of whom were subsequently charged with Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation and other related offences.

The PSNI has also invested in joint training with An Garda Síochána, in order to deliver the highest possible standard of cross border co-operation and investigation on this issue.

On 23 February this year a human trafficking awareness seminar was held in Belfast for around 120 frontline staff from health and social services, education, law enforcement, legal, religious and voluntary/community organisations.

As part of that seminar the Blue Blindfold campaign was officially launched in Northern Ireland. The campaign aims to increase public awareness of human trafficking and to encourage reporting of any suspicions. I intend to repeat the campaign early in the New Year, to reinforce the message that human trafficking is happening in Northern Ireland and that the PSNI needs the public to be vigilant to help stamp out this vile crime. I hope that this campaign will be run jointly with the relevant agencies and the Irish authorities.

On behalf of the Organised Crime Task Force I recently launched a multi-lingual poster and leaflet, which is targeted at potential victims of trafficking. These resources are displayed in key places where victims might come into contact with them including, ports, main railway stations, health centres and Doctors' surgeries.

Court Service Case Number 10/111192

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total cost, from outset to conclusion, of bringing Court Service case number 10/111192 to trial at Dungannon Crown Court, broken down by costs incurred for prosecution, defence, court, jury, interpreter and any other relevant costs.

(AQW 2236/11)

Minister of Justice: The available information cannot be disaggregated in the way the question asks. Some of the costs of this case are not yet known – for example the legal aid costs may not be submitted for some months.

The table below sets out the estimated costs associated with the bringing to trial and hearing of case number 10/111192 including all appearances before the Magistrates' Court and Crown Court.

Cost Type	Estimated Cost
PSNI Prosecution	£358
PPS Prosecution	£1,000
Defence (Legal Aid Costs)	£10,000
Court (Judiciary and Court Staff)	£1,874
Jury expenses	£409
Interpreters	£959
Facilities (eg Courtroom Accommodation)	£360
Total	£14,960

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2275/11)

Minister of Justice: The Department of Justice's Budget 2010 proposals for both revenue and capital expenditure will be Equality Impact Assessed. However, this process cannot be completed until the Department's budget allocation is finalised and firm spending plans are agreed across the DOJ.

The process will include an assessment of the impact of the spending proposals on issues of Equality, Good Relations, Poverty, Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2282/11)

Minister of Justice: The Department of Justice has facilitated 16 internships in 2010/11 and arrangements have already been made to facilitate 1 internship in 2011/12.

Carlisle House Substance Misuse Treatment Centre

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Justice if he has any plans to use the facilities available at the Carlisle House Substance Misuse Treatment Centre for treating offenders who have addictions, as an alternative to fines or custodial sentences.

(AQW 2309/11)

Minister of Justice: The Department of Justice currently has no plans to use Carlisle House. However, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, a Non Departmental Public Body of the DoJ, does use Carlisle House for offenders with addiction issues.

Maghaberry Prison

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the cost of the clean-up, resolution, negotiation and refurbishment of Maghaberry Prison following the dissident republican disorder, (i) whether funding will come from the Treasury or his Department's budget; and (ii) how this funding will impact on current resources.

(AQW 2334/11)

Minister of Justice: Both capital and resource expenditure has been funded from the relevant NIPS budget which was allocated by the Department of Justice.

There has been no impact on resources outside NIPS, as all expenditure to date has been managed within the existing allocation. Some elements of additional security are consistent with the programme to review and upgrade security at Maghaberry.

Violence in Rathcoole

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been (i) questioned; (ii) arrested; (iii) charged; and (iv) convicted in relation to the recent violence that took place in Rathcoole.

(AQW 2336/11)

Minister of Justice: To date (25 November) 6 persons have been arrested and questioned in relation to the violence which occurred in the Rathcoole area on 25 - 26 October. Of these, 1 individual has been charged, 3 have been released pending reports to the Public Prosecution Service and the remaining 2

were released unconditionally. Information is not yet available on convictions for these offences as they have not yet completed the criminal process.

Terminally-ill Prisoners

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Justice to outline the procedures in place concerning the possible release of terminally-ill prisoners on compassionate grounds.

(AQW 2343/11)

Minister of Justice: In circumstances where a prisoner is deemed by the prison's General Medical Practitioner to have reached the stage where terminal illness necessitates a higher level of palliative care than can be provided within the prison, Section 16 of the Prison Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 or Prison Rule 27(2) may be invoked, which could lead to the prisoner being taken to a hospital or other suitable place for the purposes of investigation, observation or treatment.

Convictions for Assaults on Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of convictions for assaults on staff of (i) medical facilities; (ii) the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service; and (iii) ambulance crews, broken down by each court division, in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2384/11)

Minister of Justice: The information is not available in the format requested. Assaults on staff of medical facilities and ambulance crews do not constitute a separate offence and it is therefore not possible to separate out the number of convictions for assault on ambulance personnel or medical facility staff.

The Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 provides for an offence of assaulting or obstructing a fire and rescue officer. In 2006 (the only year for which figures are currently available), there were no convictions for this offence.

Riots in Ardoyne and Rathcoole

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions in relation to the recent riots in (a) Ardoyne; and (b) Rathcoole.

(AQW 2407/11)

Minister of Justice: The PPS has advised that to date (30 November) prosecution decisions have been issued in respect of 39 persons relating to incidents in the Ardoyne area over the 12-13 July period. Of these, 35 cases are currently progressing through the Courts; 3 individuals have been convicted; and 1 person has been dealt with by a diversionary option.

In respect of incidents in the Rathcoole area over the 25-26 October period, 3 people have been reported by police to the PPS. Prosecution decisions in relation to these individuals will be taken in due course.

Women in the PSNI

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Justice what percentage of the PSNI workforce was female in each of the last ten years; and what steps he is taking to increase the number of women in the PSNI.

(AQW 2452/11)

Minister of Justice: The female composition of the PSNI is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

The Northern Ireland Policing Board has responsibility for making, and periodically amending, the Gender Action Plan which focuses on recruitment, retention and progression of females in the PSNI. The Gender Action Plan was last updated in 2008. My Department is one of the statutory consultees to the action plan.

Prison Services: Absences

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to outline the levels of sickness absence in the Prison Service over the last three years.

(AQO 619/11)

Minister of Justice: During the 2007/08 year the level of sick absence in the prison service totalled an average of 17.72 days per member of staff. During 2008/09 that figure fell to an average of 14.52 days and during 2009/10 the average again fell to 12.65 days. These figures include all staff working within the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Mr Speaker we are not complacent about the progress to date and every effort is being made to reduce the levels of absence further. As the figures for the first six months of this year demonstrate progress is being made. Management is committed to continue to work with staff and their Trade Unions to address this issue.

Justice Bill: Community Impact

Mr L Cree asked the Minister of Justice if he will work with the Committee for Justice on the possible inclusion of provisions on community impact assessments within the Justice Bill.

(AQO 616/11)

Minister of Justice: The Member will no doubt be aware that the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice, Dr Michael Maguire, has recommended that my Department should undertake a feasibility study into the introduction of community impact assessments and report on it by June 2011. This was in the context of Dr Maguire's report into the justice system's handling of sexual offences cases, with particular reference to the circumstances of the McDermott case, which was published on 9 November.

In accepting the recommendation, I made it clear that we need to be careful not to create unrealistic expectations about what effect community impact assessments could have, were they to be introduced. While they may well help to give communities a voice, which is undoubtedly important, decisions in court will still be made independently by the judge, based on the evidence presented and the individual circumstances of each case.

There are a number of ways in which community impact assessments could operate. And the very fact that the Chief Inspector's recommendation was framed in terms of undertaking a feasibility study was, I believe, a recognition of the complexity and sensitivity of this particular issue. We will need to consider the available options very carefully.

I am very happy to give a commitment to work closely with the Committee for Justice as we undertake this important piece of work.

But, turning to the specifics of the Member's question, it would not really be feasible to use the current Justice Bill as the vehicle for introducing community impact assessments. It is established practice across government that new policies are fully assessed, screened for their equality impact and opened up to public consultation. It will be important that we do this in order to arrive at the right solution for the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. If we decide to proceed with the introduction of community impact assessments, it would be more realistic to plan to legislate for this in our next Justice Bill.

Police: Complaints

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Justice whether he has raised with the Chief Constable the high levels of incivility complaints made against police officers to the Police Ombudsman in recent years.
(AQO 623/11)

Minister of Justice: Whilst the conduct and discipline of police officers is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, public confidence in the police is a departmental priority.

The Chief Constable remains committed to reducing the number of complaints being made against police officers, and the Assembly can be assured that he has been active in assessing and responding to the profile of complaints against officers.

I fully support the extensive initiatives taken by the PSNI to reduce the number of complaints and thereby to increase community confidence and trust in the police throughout Northern Ireland.

Prisoners: Deaths in Custody

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners have died in custody over the last five years.
(AQO 624/11)

Minister of Justice: Since 2005 16 prisoners have died in the three Northern Ireland prison establishments. In addition, nine prisoners have died in outside hospitals, of whom two had been granted compassionate release on licence. Two prisoners have died whilst being unlawfully at large. There has also been one death in police custody. A little over half of these deaths have been as a result of natural causes.

The Prison Service takes its duty of care very seriously. Since the transfer of responsibility for healthcare in April 2008 the Prison Service has a strong working partnership with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust for the delivery of healthcare services.

The needs of the prison population are complex, a disproportionately high level of prisoners present with mental health problems or personality disorders. I am committed to providing effective services to offenders in custody in order to better support prisoners at risk, in partnership with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety,

Safer custody is a priority and the Service is currently taking forward a range of strategic measures to identify and better meet the needs of vulnerable prisoners. These include the introduction last December of a new multi agency approach to Supporting Prisoners at Risk (SPAR).

NIPS also has strong links with the Samaritans organisation in the provision of a peer support scheme known as Listeners. Listeners are prisoners, trained by the Samaritans in listening skills, with the objective being to offer confidential emotional support to those who wish to share their problems with someone who is not a member of prison staff, but is willing to listen.

The new REACH and OUTREACH facilities will also provide a therapeutic regime for our most vulnerable prisoners.

Young Offenders: Remand

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice how many inmates at the Young Offenders' Centre are currently on remand awaiting trial.
(AQO 627/11)

Minister of Justice: There are currently 78 inmates on remand in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre, inclusive of both inmates on remand and awaiting trial. This figure includes eleven juvenile inmates on remand, ten of whom are aged 17 years old.

Prisoners: Christmas Parole

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners, over the last five years, were given parole for the Christmas period and failed to return to prison.

(AQO 628/11)

Minister of Justice: In the last five years a total of 462 prisoners have been granted parole for the Christmas period. Of these, a total of seven prisoners failed to return as required. All of these prisoners were subsequently returned to custody, including two prisoners who returned voluntarily.

All 76 prisoners who participated in the Home Leave at Christmas Scheme last year returned on time, as required.

The Home leave at Christmas Scheme is an important part of the resettlement process which strengthens family links and helps to reduce levels of re-offending on release.

Eligibility for the scheme is governed by tight criteria, which have been published by the Prison Service. It is based on a prisoner having reached his home leave eligibility date (usually within the last year of sentence) and having been successfully tested by an overnight period of home leave before Christmas releases begin. Eligibility is also subject to risk assessments and public protection considerations.

The scheme has been operating successfully now for a number of years with a very low failure rate: approximately only 1.5% of prisoners participating in the scheme over the last five years have failed to return as required.

The scheme has also been modified to limit eligibility largely to those prisoners who are in their last year of sentence. This is expected to further reduce the level of prisoners who fail to return as required, whilst still ensuring that appropriate prisoners can benefit from this important scheme.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Justice what action his Department is taking to address anti-social behaviour.

(AQO 630/11)

Minister of Justice: Tackling anti-social behaviour is one of my Department's key priorities, and we are currently on target to deliver a 15% reduction in anti-social behaviour incidents over the three year period ending March 2011. Last year (2009/10) saw a 17.2% reduction on the baseline year (2007/08). These reductions have continued into this year (2010/11) where most recent figures show there has been a 20.2% reduction between April and September 2010 and the same period in the baseline year (Apr-Sept 2007).

The approach to tackling anti-social behaviour can be summarised by 3 themes of prevention, intervention and enforcement which collectively have resulted in 17,000 fewer incidents of anti-social behaviour in 2009/10 than in 2007/08.

At a local level tackling anti-social behaviour is prioritised in Community Safety Partnership action plans to ensure local delivery against a strategic priority.

Dealing with this issue is not solely the responsibility of any one agency. It requires a partnership approach and my Department will continue to work with PSNI, district councils and the NI Housing Executive in their actions to tackle anti-social behaviour. They are using the full range of tools available to them against the themes of prevention which includes initiatives such as neighbourhood watch, intervention which includes diversionary programmes such as 'Splash' and enforcement which provides for a graduated approach from warning letters to Acceptable Behaviour Contracts through to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs).

Tackling anti-social behaviour will continue to be a priority for my Department and the forthcoming consultation on a new Community Safety Strategy will provide an opportunity to consider the current

approaches to tackling anti social behaviour as well as obtaining views on the use of anti social behaviour orders and alternative approaches to addressing anti social behaviour.

Department for Regional Development

Cost of Calls and Lines Supplied by BT

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of calls and lines supplied by BT to his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2096/11)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): DFP, through IT Assist, is responsible for most of the telephony services used by NICS, including DRD. Voice services are provided via the DIAL network and the Department is charged directly by DFP. Charges include both call charges and a tariff. All invoices from various suppliers are consolidated by DFP and apportioned across departments based on extension numbers. This apportionment is known as the tariff and it is not possible to provide figures for a single supplier. A breakdown of the total DIAL telephony cost for DRD, to call and tariff level for each of the last five financial years, is set out in the table below:-

	2005/06 £	2006/07 £	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £
Tariff	187,772.37	191,687.93	187,146.96	195,620.06	221,793.75
Calls	208,288.37	155,431.79	136,198.74	131,480.27	127,172.45

The Department also has a number of lines that are leased separately from BT. The following list details those payments, which includes calls, data communications and lines, over the past five years:-

2005/06	£679,000
2006/07	£728,000
2007/08	£716,000
2008/09	£794,000
2009/10	£706,000

These figures are a best estimate. Whilst every effort has been made to identify cost and charges specifically related to lines, due to the large number of payments that have been made to BT over the past five years it has not been possible to accurately determine which of the payments relate solely to lines except at disproportionate cost.

Telecommunications

Mr M Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all companies currently responsible for the delivery of telecommunications for his Department.

(AQW 2097/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The main providers of telecommunications services to both DRD and NICS are BT and Eircom. The full list of providers is as follows:

Atlas Communications

BT

C&W

C&W Energis

Eircom
Fenix Solutions
Global crossing
O2
Opal
Orange
Siemens
Virgin Media
Vodafone
Wireless Logic

Broken Street Lighting

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there is a (i) target time; and (ii) maximum target time for restoring broken street lighting.

(AQW 2140/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service aims to respond to defective street lights within five working days of notification. However, depending on the nature of the defective light, it may not always be possible to locate and repair all problems within this time scale. For example, in cases where there is an underground cable fault or a failure in the electricity supply, repairs are completed as quickly as possible but it may take more than five working days depending on the circumstances.

I can advise that Roads Service aims to ensure that 98% of all street lights are operational at all times, and has consistently met and exceeded this target over recent years.

East Street Car Park in Warrenpoint

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will consider renaming the East Street Car Park in Warrenpoint to The Shambles Car Park, to mark the historic significance of this site.

(AQW 2146/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that it is customary and practicable to officially name car parks after the street in which they are located or accessed from. Roads Service does not intend to change this policy at this time, therefore I am unable to accede to your request.

Proposed A5 Road Project

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the process followed when appointing Mouchel as consultants for the A5 road project.

(AQW 2153/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service appointed Mouchel, in October 2007, as its lead consultant on the A5 Project, through a framework contract established in August 2005: - 'Consultancy Services for the Assistance in the delivery of the Roads Service Strategic Road Improvement (SRI) Programme, Major Works Planning, Assessment and Delivery Contract'. This framework contract was renewed in July 2009 and Mouchel's commission was continued through this renewed contract, with effect from 1 December 2009.

The A5 project is being delivered through an Early Contractor Involvement procurement route whereby contractors, assisted by their own consultant designers, are combining with Mouchel to deliver the project. The actual scheme has been split into three distinct sections and the three contractor/consultant consortiums were appointed, in December 2009, to form the Integrated Delivery Team to deliver the whole project, with Mouchel as the lead consultant.

Development work on the A5 Western Transport Corridor is progressing well and the draft statutory orders and Environmental Statement were published earlier this month.

Proposed A5 Road Project

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what is the current estimated amount of land that will be used in the construction of the proposed A5 road: and (ii) whether any Areas of Special Scientific Interest or Environmentally Significant Land will be impinged.

(AQW 2154/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that approximately 1,200 hectares of land will be required for the construction of the proposed A5 dual carriageway. Approximately 250 hectares of this land will be required temporarily during the construction phase.

The environmental assessment has identified and assessed impacts on designated sites and environmentally sensitive areas. The proposed A5 dual carriageway will not involve any direct landtake from any Areas of Special Scientific Interest. However, the proposed road will cross the Special Areas of Conservation of the River Foyle and its Tributaries. Where this occurs, the scheme has been designed to avoid and minimise impacts, for example, by the use of clear span bridges.

There are a number of additional areas across the scheme where impacts would occur on other environmental features, for example, the scheme would involve the demolition of Castletown House, a Grade B1 listed building, and landtake from agricultural land and woodland. Full details are available in the Environmental Statement which is available on the scheme website at www.a5wtc.com.

Proposed A5 Road Project

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development how many farmers and landowners will lose land due to the proposed A5 road project.

(AQW 2155/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that land will be required from 419 landowners for the A5 scheme. Of these, 331 are agricultural holdings, of which 282 are actively farmed. The remaining agricultural holdings are mostly single fields and not farmed.

Impact on farms is discussed in Chapter 15 of the Environmental Statement which is available at http://a5wtc.com/Statutory_Procedures.aspx.

Proposed A5 and A8 Road Projects

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development whether a contract has been signed with the Government in the Republic of Ireland for the delivery of finance for the proposed A5 and A8 road projects.

(AQW 2156/11)

Minister for Regional Development: In 2007 the Irish Government confirmed its commitment to make a £400 million contribution to the A5 and A8 projects and the Executive agreed, in principle, to take forward both projects. Furthermore, the terms on which funding is to be provided were agreed at the North South Ministerial Council plenary session held in July 2009.

You may be interested to know that the third key milestone, publication of draft statutory orders, was met, on target, during week commencing 15 November 2010.

20 mph Speed Limit Outside Schools

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he intends to introduce a 20mph speed limit outside schools.

(AQW 2165/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The important issue of safer travel to schools, and road safety measures around schools, is fully recognised by my Department's Roads Service, and it has invested

considerable resources in trying to make it as safe as possible for children travelling to and from school.

Roads Service has recently piloted two part time 20 mph speed limits at two rural schools, where the national speed limit currently applies, and at a school located in a more urban environment. The pilots at the two rural schools have proven to be very successful in reducing vehicle speeds during those periods when there are higher levels of activity at the school entrance, such as at opening and closing time. There was, however, a less marked reduction at the school in the more urban environment.

Roads Service's speed management policy encourages further roll out of 20 mph limits and zones, in residential and other areas where there is a high proportion of vulnerable road users present. However, these limits and zones are only effective when they are backed up with physical traffic calming measures, or the existing average speed of vehicles is close to 20 mph. Research has shown that erection of permanent 20 mph signs will only result in a 1 mph reduction in speeds, and that drivers show a tendency to disregard such signs whenever they see there is no activity at schools for the vast majority of time.

Unfortunately, the approximate cost per rural site is high at £64,000, and given the current financial climate and the budgetary constraints facing my Department, it is unlikely that I will be able to announce the go-ahead for a comprehensive programme for some time.

However, a number of other measures, including warning signs, road markings advising motorists of the presence of children and additional electronic warning signs have been installed as part of the Safer Routes to School Initiative. In addition, schools in residential areas frequently have traffic calming measures, such as road humps installed, as part of an overall scheme for the surrounding area.

Procurement Contracts

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans he has to review procurement contracts relating to the recycling of materials in Roads Service, to ensure that contracts represent value for money.

(AQW 2184/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it continually reviews opportunities, in every construction contract, to maximise the use of recycling methods or reuse of materials in each construction contract, in order to reduce the quantity of waste sent to landfill.

Recycling, reuse or disposal of materials recovered on site is an integral element within the scope of our works projects and is, therefore, incorporated within the contracts, which are procured on a quality/price basis. In the tender process, quality marks are also allocated to sustainability as part of contract evaluations and, clear targets are set for site specific measures relating to recycling and environmental considerations in the works information.

I can advise that in April 2009, Roads Service was the first Government Agency in the North to sign up to Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) - The Construction Commitments, Halving Waste to Landfill, which identifies how organisations can "play their part" through their influence over construction contracts.

Roads Service has previously participated in an initiative to measure the total quantities of potential waste produced, that was recycled, reused on site or sent to landfill, in all construction contracts with a value greater than £300,000. This was carried out during the period April 2009 to March 2010, with data being collected from 14 construction projects that had a total spend of £62 million. The outcome indicated that there were over half a million tonnes of potential waste produced, of which, 57% was recycled, recovered or reused, with the remaining 43% being sent to licensed landfill sites. As part of this initiative, Roads Service has now set a target of a 10% year on year improvement for the amount of material recycled, recovered or reused during 2010/11 and 2011/12.

Travel Claims by Roads Service Employees

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of travel claims by Roads Service employees in each of the last five years, broken down by Roads Service division.

(AQW 2185/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that details of expenditure on travel claims by Roads Service employees in each of the last five years, broken down by Roads Service Division and its other main business areas, are shown in the table below:

COST OF TRAVEL CLAIMS BY ROADS SERVICE EMPLOYEES

Division	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	Total
East	252,256.95	250,344.78	278,864.73	294,148.52	272,122.97	1,347,737.95
North	338,504.27	332,550.17	327,343.07	311,172.69	339,904.56	1,649,474.76
South	330,205.82	317,437.11	329,203.15	344,223.12	345,198.29	1,666,267.49
West	426,295.70	332,408.17	370,276.78	358,133.90	339,828.47	1,826,943.02
HQ	70,789.65	111,358.52	119,027.70	129,276.36	92,779.31	523,231.54
TEPU	104,872.13	122,954.17	108,183.28	105,023.05	64,717.30	505,749.93
RSC	735,285.44	649,823.81	688,999.45	706,582.62	642,912.49	3,423,603.81
RSD	403,731.95	369,785.83	394,986.79	423,203.25	418,068.47	2,009,776.29

Roads Service's internal contractor, Roads Service Direct (RSD), and its internal consultancy service, Roads Service Consultancy (RSC), provide support across all four Divisions. TEPU is Roads Service's Transportation & Engineering Policy Unit.

These figures exclude expenditure for mileage claims relating to overtime. Spend in 2005-2006 to 2008-2009, includes expenditure relating to standard mileage claims for industrial staff, however, since responsibility for the payment of Industrial Staff moved from the Department to HR Connect in 2009-2010, these costs are no longer easily identifiable.

Details of expenditure for mileage claims relating to overtime for this five year period, and those relating to standard mileage claims for industrial staff for 2009-2010, could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Roads Service Vehicles

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of repairs, service and maintenance of (i) in-house Roads Service vehicles; and (ii) contracted out Roads Service vehicles, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2186/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that details of the cost of repairs, servicing and maintenance of Roads Service vehicles, carried out in-house and contracted out, in each of the last five years, are contained in the table below:

Roads Service Vehicles - Repair, Service and Maintenance Costs 2005-2010.

Financial Year	In-House Roads Service Vehicles	Contracted Out Roads Service Vehicles
2005-2006	£472,880	£1,135,237
2006-2007	£570,855	£996,446

Financial Year	In-House Roads Service Vehicles	Contracted Out Roads Service Vehicles
2007-2008	£671,446	£1,037,644
2008-2009	£805,599	£1,180,443
2009-2010	£1,030,808	£1,237,719

Creagh Waste Water Treatment Project

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1863/11, (i) to detail the projected cost provided by the company that was awarded the tender for the Creagh Waste Water Treatment Project; and (ii) to provide a breakdown of the projected land valuation costs associated with the project.

(AQW 2190/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the current projected costs for the construction works associated with the Creagh Wastewater Treatment Works Project are as set out in the table below.

Element	Cost (£000s)
Professional Services Contract for preliminary design	150
Construction of the wastewater treatment works (including NIW held risk contingency)	4,091
Construction of the essential networks to service the wastewater treatment works (including NIW held risk contingency)	1,790
Total	6,031

The projected land valuation costs of £85,000 are based on a wayleave compensation value of around £20 – £25 per metre, dependant on ground type, over the total projected 3,900 metres of sewers to be laid as part of the essential networks required for the project.

A55 Knock Road Widening Scheme

Sir Reg Empey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost to his Department of maintaining land vested for the A55 Knock Road Widening Scheme, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2203/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, details of the maintenance costs for lands owned by my Department's Roads Service, are not recorded in a manner that would easily allow the extraction of figures for a specific site. My Department's Roads Service has therefore advised that details of costs for maintenance to the lands at A55 Knock Road could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

However, Roads Service has advised that in the last five years, the work undertaken on the lands vested for the A55 Knock Road Widening Scheme has included hedge and grass cutting, as well as repairs to properties 11 and 13 Shandon Park, following damage caused by freezing weather and vandalism.

A55 Knock Road Widening Scheme

Sir Reg Empey asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the works projected for the A55 Knock Road Widening Scheme and when he expects work to commence.

(AQW 2207/11)

Minister for Regional Development: You may be aware that in March 2010, I decided that a Public Inquiry should be held to consider the issues raised by objectors to the A55 Knock Road proposals. The Inquiry was held at the Park Avenue Hotel between 8 and 11 November 2010. My Department's Roads Service expects to receive the Inspector's report in Spring 2011, and will consider the recommendations made in the report before making a statement outlining the proposals it intends to take forward.

The Investment Delivery Plan for Roads, which sets out the roads programme under the funding envisaged through the Investment Strategy 2008 – 2018, indicates that delivery of the A55 Knock Road widening scheme is planned for the second half of the Strategy period, that is, 2013/14 to 2017/18. However, the outcome of the current budget review and the work surrounding Investment Strategy 3, will determine how quickly Roads Service can deliver this scheme.

EWAY Scheme Proposed for East Belfast

Sir Reg Empey asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects work to commence on the EWAY scheme proposed for East Belfast; and to detail the projected costs.

(AQW 2208/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The Strategic Outline Case (SOC) for Belfast Rapid Transit confirmed that bus based Rapid Transit was viable for Belfast and recommended a pilot network connecting East Belfast, West Belfast and Titanic Quarter with and through the city centre. It identified an indicative project cost of some £150m.

My Department is in the process of securing external support to complete the Outline Business Case (OBC) for the pilot Belfast Rapid Transit network, including the EWAY route to East Belfast. The OBC will identify the preferred options for Belfast Rapid Transit in terms of the network routes, procurement strategy, commercial/business model and fare system. Identifying the preferred options will allow the Department to undertake the necessary public consultation, impact assessments and appraisals on the scheme. The OBC will also provide confirmation of the budgetary requirements and timescales for the identified preferred option.

My Department, in preparation for the OBC process, has completed survey data collection work and is preparing preliminary designs for all route alignment options. The preliminary designs will form part of a public awareness exercise, which is anticipated to take place in 2011, as part of the OBC process. This will give everyone an opportunity to comment on the options for Belfast Rapid Transit, including the route alignment options.

Eastern Division of the Roads Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total budget of the Eastern Division of the Roads Service in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2210/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the budget outturn in each of the last five financial years, in Eastern Division, is detailed in the table below:-

Year	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Total
Eastern Division outturn	£47,367,000	£55,239,000	£50,798,000	£52,900,000	£60,232,000	£266,536,000

Please note that this spend does not include the outturn associated with work undertaken in Eastern Division by Roads Service's internal contractor, Roads Service Direct. This information is not readily available and could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

I should also explain that Roads Service allocates its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across Divisions, on the basis of need. 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 time savings, environmental impact, accessibility and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be attributed to one Division, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to that particular area.

Speed Bumps

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many speed bumps are located in the North Down area.

(AQW 2211/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service carries out a programme of Traffic Calming schemes each year. The overall objective of this programme is to improve driver behaviour and control traffic speed, in order to reduce the number of collisions, primarily those involving pedestrians and cyclists. These Traffic Calming schemes incorporate a number of traffic calming measures, not all of which involve the use of speed bumps. The results of this work are published in the Road Safety Engineering Report which is available online at:-

<http://applications.drdni.gov.uk/publications/document.asp?docid=19634>

With regard to the North Down area, Roads Service does not hold the requested information by constituency, however, it can provide the information by Roads Service Division.

The table below details the number of Traffic Calming schemes incorporating speed bumps, within Eastern Division, since the 1999-2000 financial year:-

YEAR	Number of Traffic Calming Schemes Incorporating Speed Bumps (Eastern Division)
1999/00	8
2000/01	9
2001/02	14
2002/03	11
2003/04	21
2004/05	26
2005/06	21
2006/07	15
2007/08	16
2008/09	23
2009/10	14
Total	162

Capital Budget for Road Schemes for 2011-12

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects to finalise the capital budget for road schemes for 2011/12.

(AQW 2213/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service's planned expenditure after 2010/11 is subject to funding from the outcome of the Budget 2010 process, which has not yet been agreed by the Executive.

A5 Western Transport Corridor

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development what consultation was undertaken and consideration given to a multi-model solution for the A5 Western Transport Corridor.

(AQW 2225/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The A5 was identified as one of five Key Transport Corridors within the Regional Strategic Transport Network Plan 2015. This plan was developed to support both the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2025 and the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) 2002-2012.

The RTS, which includes improvements to walking, cycling and public transport, as well as the strategic transport network, was prepared against the background of wider transportation policy in the European Union. The overall development of the strategy was based upon the Guidance on the Methodology for Multi-Modal Studies (GOMMMS). As part of this development process, the document was subject to a comprehensive consultation exercise.

Roads at Bushforde and Bush Manor, Antrim

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 6565/10, for an update on the adoption of the roads in Bush Manor, Antrim; and what recent discussions have taken place between his Department and the administrator.

(AQW 2226/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the present position regarding the streets in Bush Manor, Antrim is as follows:-

- (a) emergency repairs have been carried out on site;
- (b) remedial work required to bring roads and sewers to adoption standard has been listed;
- (c) remedial work required to obtain technical approval for the retaining wall along the front of the site is ongoing;
- (d) an Article 11 Notice, under the Private Streets (NI) Order, was served on the developer/administrator on 1 November 2010, to allow Roads Service to employ a contractor to complete the streets; and
- (e) 28 days after the Article 11 Notice has been served, Roads Service will employ a contractor to complete the streets, should the developer/administrator fail to act.

I am further advised that the administrator, having received the Article 11 Notice, is aware of the above situation. Roads Service has had discussions with the administrator regarding this Notice, who has indicated that it would not have the resources to complete the streets. It is therefore likely that Roads Service will have to employ a contractor to undertake the works required to complete the site.

Adoption of Roads in Glencraig Manor, Antrim

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development if there is an ongoing dispute between a developer and his Department in relation to the adoption of roads in Glencraig Manor, Antrim.

(AQW 2227/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I refer the Member to my answer to Assembly Question AQW 2092/11.

Unadopted Roads in the Antrim Borough Council Area

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all the unadopted roads in the Antrim Borough Council area, including an indication as to whether each road is planned for adoption in the next (i) 6 months; or (ii) 12 months.

(AQW 2228/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Details of the unadopted roads in the Antrim Borough Council area are provided in the table below. My Department's Roads Service has advised that developers are responsible for completing private streets/roads and it is therefore not possible to give an accurate indication of future adoption dates. However, where there is inappropriate delay, Roads Service can, and will, use the Private Streets legislation, to ensure adoption.

Development

Spire Way, Moneyglass, Toomebridge
 Off Castle Road, Randalstown
 Edgewood Court, Antrim
 St James Meadow, Crumlin
 Millhouse Village, Antrim
 Birchdale, Portglenone Road, Randalstown
 Carnbeg, Kilbegs Road, Antrim
 Cherry Tree Grove, Belfast Road, Antrim
 Castle Avenue, Randalstown
 Bushforde Manor, Antrim
 Maple Park, Lurgan Road, Crumlin
 Glencraig Manor, Antrim
 The Cedars, Cunningham Way, Antrim
 Bleach Green, Islandreagh Drive, Dunadry
 Main Street, Crumlin
 Balloo Manor, Dublin Road, Antrim
 Niblock Oaks, Niblock Road, Antrim
 Lamonts Mill, Riverside, Antrim
 Road G Junction One, Antrim
 Bush Road, Antrim
 Road F Stiles Way to Randalstown Link, Junction One, Antrim
 Tesco, Main Street, Crumlin
 Moneynick Road, Toomebridge
 Ballydonaghy Road, Crumlin
 Stiles Way, Antrim (games area)

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2234/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Section 75 considerations have been taken into account on my Department's Budget 2010 revenue and capital spending proposals from the outset. Business areas in my Department have already carried out High Level Impact Assessments (HLIA) and equality screenings on all spending bids. These identified the differential equality impacts of each proposal. They also considered opportunities to promote sustainable development, good relations and the impacts on individuals, groups or areas suffering social disadvantage. Separately, my Department has also looked at the short term benefits of bids to the local construction sector and longer term economic growth.

The HLIAs and screening exercises for each of my Department's three main programmes – Water, Roads, and Transport - will form the basis of an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on DRD's Budget 2010 proposals. My Department plans to issue this EQIA for formal consultation after the Executive has agreed a Draft Budget.

Upgrade of the A32

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development how much of the £5 million committed by his Department for the upgrade of the A32 has been released to date; and when the balance will be released.

(AQW 2242/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is currently developing several improvement schemes along the A32 between Dromore and Enniskillen and, to date, has spent £1.8 million. This figure includes £600,000 for the completion of advance site works at the scheme at Drumskinny, with the remaining balance used for essential design and development work of the proposed schemes. A further £7.5 million has been expended advancing proposals for a new link road between Cherrymount Roundabout and Tempo Road, Enniskillen.

Roads Service remains committed to delivering a programme of improvement works along this route. However, the timing of further expenditure will be dependent on the extent of subsequent allocations to my Department.

Legal Services

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1509/11, how much was paid in legal fees to the Departmental Solicitors Office and the Crown Solicitors.

(AQW 2267/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The amounts paid to the Departmental Solicitors Office and the Crown Solicitors in each of the last five years are as follows:

	2005/06 £	2006/07 £	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £
Crown Solicitors	70,674	85,246	3,977	4,796	1,128
Departmental Solicitors Office	26,137	76,037	20,710	135	0

Parking and Traffic Issues in Whiteabbey and Jordanstown

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to address the current and growing parking and traffic issues affecting businesses in the Whiteabbey and Jordanstown areas.

(AQW 2378/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that the issue of long-stay parking within Whiteabbey village was raised at a recent meeting with Newtownabbey Borough Council. I am advised that parking problems in the village have been exacerbated by the closure of the Loughshore Park by the Council whilst it is carrying out works at that location. Mr Hutton, the Divisional

Roads Manager, agreed to consider the various options that may be available and report back to the Council.

I expect that Mr Hutton's response to the Council will issue in early December 2010 and I have asked that it is copied to you for information.

Since 2004, Park and Ride capacity has increased at Whiteabbey rail station from 16 to 80 spaces, and at Greenisland Rail Station from 13 to 85 spaces. My Department is also currently carrying out a strategic review of Park and Ride facilities, with the aim of developing proposals for future provision which would offer the best prospect of maximising modal shift from car travel. The review is ongoing and no decisions have yet been taken.

My Department is also working with the University of Ulster in providing assistance for the development of a Workplace Travel Plan. The main purpose of these plans is to help organisations to reduce the volume of cars travelling to their sites by promoting the possible alternatives to single car occupancy use. The benefits to these areas of reducing commuter dependency on single car occupancy include reductions in traffic and congestion, travel stress and improvements in punctuality.

Rolling Stock on the Larne Railway Line

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average age of rolling stock on the Larne railway line.

(AQW 2453/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The nine Class 450 trains were built between 1985 and 1987; therefore the ages of these trains range from 23 to 25 years.

The Class 80 trains were built between 1969 and 1978; therefore the ages of these trains range from 32 to 41 years. It should however be noted that the Class 80 vehicles were overhauled in 2008 and 2009.

These trains are due to be removed from use when the new trains being purchased come into passenger service from 2011 onwards.

Gritting Areas Around Schools

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development whether it is the Roads Service's policy to grit the area around schools; and whether he has any plans to review this policy.

(AQW 2514/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The Member will be aware that, following the severe wintry conditions experienced at the start of December 2008, I asked my Department's Roads Service to carry out an examination of its operational response to areas around rural schools. This examination resulted in Roads Service introducing enhanced communication arrangements and priority "secondary" salting to the 46 rural schools most affected by weather conditions throughout the winter of 2008/09.

It is appreciated that the list of sites benefiting from these actions is likely to change over time to include more schools, to take account of the extent to which adverse weather can affect different schools at different times.

At the time of the examination of Roads Service's operational response, the criteria for the provision of grit/salt piles and salt bins was also amended, so that these can be provided to affected schools, if requested.

As there have not been significant changes since the previous examination was carried out, I have no plans to carry out a further review of the winter service policy around schools, at this time.

Mayfield Link Road

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to outline the reasons which prevented the Mayfield Link Road onto the Sandyknowes Roundabout and the M2 from being gritted during the recent

cold spell; (ii) whether errors by his Department resulted in this road not being adopted; and (iii) what action he is taking to ensure that metro bus services continue to operate on this road this winter.

(AQW 2587/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Mayfield Link Road, Mallusk is unadopted, and therefore it has no responsibility for its maintenance.

The Mayfield Link Road was constructed as part of an adjacent residential development to provide a link for residents to the public road network, and the developer is responsible for ensuring that it is constructed to an adoptable standard.

While Roads Service can use Private Streets legislation to ensure outstanding work is completed to enable adoption, it has, in this case, been actively engaging with the developer to ensure that the link road is completed to the required adoptable standard. I can confirm that once the developer obtains the necessary approval from NI Water for the sewerage system, the adoption process can be completed.

Translink has advised, that in general terms, Translink/Metro will operate its timetable on the basis that roads remain safe to travel on. However, the safety of passengers, pedestrians, motorists and staff will always remain a paramount consideration in deciding service arrangements during adverse conditions.

Department for Social Development

Neighbourhood Renewal Funding

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister for Social Development what weight is given to volunteer development activity in the assessment of applications for Neighbourhood Renewal funding.

(AQW 2205/11)

Minister for Social Development (Mr A Attwood): There is no specific weight attached to volunteer development activity when assessing applications for Neighbourhood Renewal funding. However, where groups do include the use of volunteers within their funding application, the sustainment and/or creation of volunteer posts would be included as an output measure. This will be factored into any assessment of the options being considered when the application is undergoing economic appraisal.

I believe that it is imperative that what my Department funds under Neighbourhood Renewal produces both value for money and results. My Department encourages those organisations which it funds to maximise the opportunities to use volunteers where possible.

Proof of Age Schemes

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what proposals he has to improve 'proof of age' schemes for the sale and purchase of (i) tobacco; and (ii) alcohol.

(AQW 2241/11)

Minister for Social Development: My Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill is currently in the Committee stage of its passage through the Assembly. It will introduce a statutory proof-of-age scheme under which licensed premises and registered clubs will be encouraged to request specified documents as evidence of a young person's age. The specified proof-of-age documents are a passport, photocard driving licence, a Northern Ireland Electoral Card and any Proof of Age Standards Scheme (PASS) accredited photo.

Premises will be required to display notices highlighting offences relating to the sale of alcohol to young people under 18 and the purchase of alcohol by, or for, young people. These notices will also refer to the documents prescribed for the purposes of proving age and failure to display a notice will be an offence. The Addressing Young People's Drinking Action Plan, which was launched by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in 2009, highlighted a range of issues in relation

to the accessibility of alcohol in Northern Ireland. My Department fully supports and continues to contribute to this initiative.

The sale and purchase of tobacco is the responsibility of the DHSSPS and I have been advised that guidance was issued to all tobacco retailers in Northern Ireland before the minimum age of sale for tobacco products was increased from 16 to 18 years old in September 2008. This guidance included advice to retailers on how and when to ask customers for proof of age, and provided information on acceptable forms of photographic ID. Minister McGimpsey believes that as a result of this guidance, retailers are fully aware of their obligations with regards to asking for proof of age, and therefore, there are no immediate plans for any further developments in this area.

Housing Executive Recruitment

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) Protestants; and (ii) Roman Catholics have been recruited to the Housing Executive in Craigavon in each of the last five years; and what these figures represent as a percentage of the total number of people recruited.

(AQW 2245/11)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the number of Protestants and Roman Catholics that have been recruited to the Housing Executive in Craigavon in each of the last five years and what these figures represent as a percentage of the total number of people recruited.

Year	Location	Religious Profile		Total number recruited	Religious Profile as % of Total Recruited to Craigavon Area	
		Protestant	Roman Catholic		Protestant	Roman Catholic
2005	Area Office Lurgan/ Brownlow Portadown	1	6	245	0.41	2.45
2006	Area Office Lurgan/ Brownlow Portadown	1	7	243	0.41	2.88
2007	Area Office Housing Benefit Lurgan/ Brownlow Portadown	2	5	294	0.68	1.7
2008	Area Service Unit Rates Relief Lurgan/ Brownlow Portadown	1	5	127	0.79	3.94

Year	Location	Religious Profile		Total number recruited	Religious Profile as % of Total Recruited to Craigavon Area	
		Protestant	Roman Catholic		Protestant	Roman Catholic
2009	Area Service Unit Customer Service Unit Lurgan/ Portadown	4	6	178	2.25	3.37

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development whether any of his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review proposals for revenue and capital will be Equality Impact Assessed; and if so, to outline the process that will be followed.

(AQW 2273/11)

Minister for Social Development: I can assure you that my Department is committed to fulfilling its obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act), and thereby ensuring that future funding decisions are assessed for their potential impact on the nine categories listed in the legislation. Indeed, this is of particular importance to my Department as the majority of its work is aimed at redressing poverty and disadvantage in our society.

In order to inform the Budget process, my Department has already carried out an initial high level impact assessments of Equality, Good Relations, Poverty/Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development on possible spending proposals. This assessment, along with those of other departments will be used by the Office of the First & Deputy First Minister in drafting an Equality Impact Assessment at strategic level to accompany the forthcoming Programme for Government and in work in relation to the Budget and Investment Strategy.

My Department is unable to undertake further assessment with regard to equality until the level of our final budget allocation is known. Once this information is available my Department will consider the impact of its funding decisions on Section 75 groups in line with the Equality Commission's Guidance. This dictates that a full Equality Impact Assessment should be carried out if the potential for significant adverse impact on equality of opportunity on any of the nine categories is identified.

Households With No One in Work

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of households currently in each (i) council area; and (ii) constituency with no-one in work; and what these figures represent as a percentage of the total number of households in each council area and constituency.

(AQW 2293/11)

Minister for Social Development: During the period 2006/09 the average annual number of households with no-one in work and their proportion of the total number of households in the Parliamentary Constituency is presented in Table 1. The percentage of households with no-one in work as a proportion of all households in each District Council area is presented in Table 2. The results are produced using the Family Resources Survey datasets for Northern Ireland, and the Households Below Average Income datasets for Northern Ireland.

TABLE 1:

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Households with no-one in work	Proportion of all Households in the Parliamentary Constituency (%)
Belfast East	12,500	34
Belfast North	14,500	49
Belfast South	11,600	38
Belfast West	16,000	48
East Antrim	13,800	36
East Londonderry	13,700	40
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	12,400	35
Foyle	16,400	44
Lagan Valley	12,000	27
Mid Ulster	10,800	29
Newry and Armagh	..	27
North Antrim	15,800	36
North Down	11,600	27
South Antrim	11,500	32
South Down	14,300	31
Strangford	13,800	31
Upper Bann	10,900	31
West Tyrone	13,400	38
NI Total	234,800	35

TABLE 2:

District Council	Percentage of Households in the District Council where no-one is in work
Antrim	27
Ards	32
Armagh	26
Ballymena	36
Ballymoney	..
Banbridge	26
Belfast	42
Carrickfergus	32
Castlereagh	34
Coleraine	41

District Council	Percentage of Households in the District Council where no-one is in work
Cookstown and Magherafelt	29
Craigavon	32
Derry	44
Down	33
Dungannon	28
Fermanagh	40
Larne And Moyle	45
Limavady	..
Lisburn	30
Newry & Mourne	27
Newtownabbey	37
North Down	27
Omagh and Strabane	38
NI Total	35

Social Housing Newbuilds

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing new build units have been (i) commenced; and (ii) completed in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three years; and how much was spent on these social housing new builds in each year.

(AQW 2333/11)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the number of social housing units commenced and completed in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three years and how much was spent on these units in each year.

Year	Units Started*	Units Completed*	Housing Association Grant
2007/08	126	59	£6,733,281
2008/09	79	76	£9,852,498
2009/10	184	84	£11,589,467

* These include figures for New Build, Off the Shelf Purchases, Existing Satisfactory Purchases and Rehab units.

Capital Projects

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how much his Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2350/11)

Minister for Social Development: The amount that my Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years is as follows:

2007/08	£11,409.00
2008/09	£47,449.00
2009/10	£62,862.00

Housing Executive Properties with Economy 7 Heating

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties in North Down currently use Economy 7 heating.

(AQW 2414/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has advised that they have 470 dwellings within its Bangor District Office area which have electrical storage heating systems.

Crumlin Road Court House

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of his recent meeting with the owner of Crumlin Road Court House, what plans the owner has for the development of the building and the timescale for completion.

(AQW 2436/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Crumlin Road Courthouse is in private ownership. The owner of the building informed me when I met him on 8 September 2010 that he continued to seek a long-term use for the Crumlin Road Courthouse and that he had been in discussion with a community-based organisation around a specific proposal for the building. I was not made aware of any further plans for the development of the building or any timescales for that to take place.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what representations he plans to make to the UK Government on the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance for people in residential accommodation.

(AQW 2451/11)

Minister for Social Development: I have concerns about a number of the proposed welfare reforms including proposed reforms to disability living allowance and I have made my views clear to both Iain Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and Lord Freud, the Minister for Welfare Reform. Indeed on 29 November I had a further meeting with Lord Freud where I raised concerns about the proposed reforms. I have also written to Iain Duncan Smith to voice my concerns on the proposals relating to the mobility component for people in residential accommodation.

West Belfast Housing Executive Repair Contract with Red Sky

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development when the investigation into the West Belfast Housing Executive repair contract with Red Sky will be concluded; and whether he will bring the result to the attention of the MLAs for the West Belfast constituency or the Assembly.

(AQW 2573/11)

Minister for Social Development: I am not yet in a position to confirm when the investigation into the West Belfast

Housing Executive repair contract with Red Sky will be concluded. The findings of the report will enable the Housing Executive to carefully consider its contractual position under the contract and decide whether any further steps against the contractor or other parties will be necessary. Any such actions will necessarily involve the right of the affected parties to make representations to the Housing Executive on its findings before any further steps can be taken.

Accordingly, in the interests of due process, it would be inappropriate and premature to publicly release the findings of the report until appropriate steps have been taken by the Housing Executive or other bodies in relation to the report. I will, of course, share with the Social Development Committee, if necessary in private and in confidence, such information that is proper to share, consistent with the standards outlined above.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 10 December 2010

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Legal Services

Mr P McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much their Department and its agencies have paid for legal services in each of the last five years; and to detail the firms engaged.
(AQW 1583/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): The total amount our Department has paid for legal services in each of the last five financial years and the names of the legal firms engaged are set out in the table below.

Year	Amount paid (£)	Legal firm(s) engaged
2005-06	100,165.96	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • O'Reilly Stewart Solicitors; • Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO).
2006-07	319,414.45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • O'Reilly Stewart Solicitors; • Crown Solicitor's Office (CSO); Treasury Solicitor's Office, London; McBurney & Co.; DSO.
2007-08	189,715.80	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DSO; • O'Reilly Stewart Solicitors; • Bernard McCloskey QC; • Aidan Sands (Barrister); • Hewitt & Gilpin Solicitors; • Stephen Shaw QC.
2008-09	277,318.36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DSO; • O'Reilly Stewart Solicitors; • David McMillen (Barrister); • Hewitt & Gilpin Solicitors; • Paul Maguire QC; • Stephen Shaw QC.

Year	Amount paid (£)	Legal firm(s) engaged
2009-10	334,526.81	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DKW (Belgian based law firm); • DSO; • Martin Wolfe (Barrister); • O'Reilly Stewart Solicitors; • David McMillen (Barrister); • Hewitt & Gilpin Solicitors; • Paul Maguire QC; • Stephen Shaw QC; • McCann Fitzgerald Solicitors.

Childcare Strategy

Ms D Purvis asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Childcare Strategy, including when the draft strategy paper will be published and when public consultation will begin.

(AQW 1678/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People identified childcare as a priority issue and agreed that a policy and economic appraisal should be carried out on a range of strategic options.

A paper on the appraisal report has now been prepared for the Executive. It outlines the key findings and when the Executive has had an opportunity to consider the paper, the next phase of the work on the development of a Childcare Strategy will begin. This work will include a public consultation.

The appraisal report contains a timetable of actions and estimates of the financial implications of these actions. It is expected that the report will form part of the evidence base underpinning the public consultation.

Community Relations Council

Mr S Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1426/11, whether the under-representation of any communities in funding awards by the Community Relations Council will be taken into account when deciding on how to move forward with those aspects of the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration; and for their assessment of how such under-representation might impact on the continuing role of the CRC in such funding awards.

(AQW 1815/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The public consultation on the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration ended on 29 October 2010. An independent analysis of the consultation responses is underway. Options for future funding arrangements, including those of the Community Relations Council, may form part of the recommendations we will be asked to consider in due course.

It is important that future funding is awarded fairly and appropriately on the basis of greatest need, maximum impact and value for money; it is unlikely that it will be awarded on a per-capita basis as this could potentially have a negative impact on some minority groups.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many interns their Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2357/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Department has not facilitated any intern placements during 2010/2011. The position will be reviewed before the 2011/2012 academic year but, at the moment, no decision has been taken.

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much their Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.
(AQW 2396/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Department has incurred no expenditure on capital projects within the Strangford constituency boundaries in the last three years.

Maze Development Corporation

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any progress on the Maze Development Corporation; and whether any blueprints or plans exist for regeneration schemes in advance of the Maze Development Corporation becoming operational next April.
(AQW 2458/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are currently considering the appointment process to establish the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation Chair and Board members. The aim is that the Corporation will be operational as soon as possible.

The Development Corporation will be tasked with building upon the work previously undertaken by OFMDFM and the all-party Maze/Long Kesh Consultation Panel to maximise the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site.

A masterplanning framework is being developed for consideration by the Development Corporation when appointed. In order to ensure there is no loss of momentum pending the creation of the Corporation, the Maze/Long Kesh Programme Delivery Unit continues with early preparatory work and has developed an interim Corporate Plan which will be provided to the Development Corporation Board for consideration.

The first phases of the interim Corporate Plan will include taking forward the development of a Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre along with, potentially, the relocation of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) for its 2012 Agricultural Show subject to the outcome of current negotiations.

Representations to Sir Jon Shortridge by Senior Civil Servants

Mr P McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 2370/11, whether they can confirm that no senior civil servants (i) requested; or (ii) were authorised to make representations to Sir Jon Shortridge regarding his investigation into the Department for Regional Development and NI Water.
(AQW 2493/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: As answered in AQW 2370/11, Sir Jon Shortridge conducted his own independent investigation. We had no involvement in relation to the members of staff who may have made representations to the investigation.

Phoenix Project Offices

Mr A Bresland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much has been spent on the refurbishment of each Phoenix Project office in the last 12 months.
(AQW 2580/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Phoenix Project has received funding under the PEACE III Programme for the purchase of IT equipment and office furniture for the six regional Phoenix Offices and one central Phoenix Office. Over the last twelve months, this funding amounted to £24,886. This

funding was distributed to the South East Fermanagh Foundation as lead partner for the Phoenix Project.

The Phoenix Projects have also received funding from the Community Relations Council's (CRC's) Victims and Survivors Capital Grant Scheme for capital expenditure items and refurbishment costs of the offices.

Over the last 12 months, the funding administered to the Phoenix Offices by CRC was as follows:

Group	Allocation
Tyrone West Phoenix	£12,435.14
Tyrone East Phoenix	£2,071.27
Ards and North Down Phoenix	£3,387.77
Fermanagh Phoenix	£3,890.20
Armagh Phoenix	£1,527.50
Total	£23,311.88

North/South Postal Arrangements

Ms M Ritchie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action will be taken at the institutional sectoral meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council to discuss North-South postal arrangements, and in particular to address the delays in receiving post experienced by customers in both jurisdictions; and if they will make a statement on this matter.

(AQW 2653/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The July 2010 NSMC Plenary noted that the NSMC Joint Secretariat had identified a number of potential new/emerging cross border mobility issues, including concerns about cross border postal services. This matter is now being examined in greater depth in consultation with relevant departments and agencies and progress will be reported to a future NSMC Institutional meeting.

In accordance with Section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 we will make a Statement to the Assembly following any future NSMC Institutional meetings.

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration: Education

Mr T Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if they can give an assurance that the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration will include a section on shared education.

(AQO 665/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The draft Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Programme, which includes a section on education, is continuing to be developed following the consultation process which closed on 29 October.

The consultation attracted 290 written responses and these are currently being analysed. The subsequent report will reflect the wealth of views and material gathered from 11 public meetings and 15 targeted sectoral meetings, which were held at a range of different locations throughout September and October. We have no doubt the findings of the report will include people's views on education.

We expect to receive the draft consultation report this month, following which we will begin the process of considering how we will build on and strengthen the document in light of the outcome of the analysis of the consultation.

This is a cross departmental document, and will receive further input from departments before we bring it to the Executive again.

Government: Revenue

Mr M McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the measures being considered by the Budget Review Group to maximise revenue generation.

(AQO 666/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Budget Review Group has met six times to date and is continuing to meet. As part of our discussions we are looking at potential revenue raising options.

However, it has to be remembered that the Executive has very limited powers to raise revenue.

Our considerations to date have included examination of the level of the regional rate as well as exploring the scope for other types of revenue generation and leveraging of funds.

A number of the parties in this Assembly have put forward their ideas and these are being examined.

The potential implications and impacts of options would have to be carefully considered.

These discussions are continuing as part of developing a Budget.

Northern Ireland Electricity: Network

Mr D McNarry asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the agreed bail-out of the Republic of Ireland, what representations have been made to the Irish Government in relation to the potential sale of Northern Ireland Electricity's grid network to the Electricity Supply Board.

(AQO 667/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Completion of the sale of the Northern Ireland Electricity grid system to the Electricity Supply Board is well underway and we do not expect that it will be affected by the bail-out.

The ESB is a semi-state owned company. This means that it has a separate Board, balance sheet and raises debt independently of the Irish Government. It is not dependent on Government funding and all of its transactions and investment plans are underpinned by borrowing from the external money markets. In this regard, ESB advise (and it was reported widely in the media) that in September it secured financing for the acquisition of NIE, through a 2.5billion euro facility. Therefore, current events should not have any bearing on the acquisition.

Joint Ministerial Committee

Mr W Irwin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the most recent meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee.

(AQO 668/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 22 November we attended a meeting of the Joint Ministerial Council in Domestic format chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg.

The main items on the Agenda were a discussion on possible changes to the dispute resolution protocol provided by the Memorandum of Understanding and an update from Francis Maude, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, on proposals for the Reform of Public Bodies.

The Member will also be aware from our subsequent press statement that we also took the opportunity to raise with the Deputy Prime Minister our concerns about the result of the spending review, and in particular the reduction in capital expenditure. The Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged that the figures are in dispute and gave an undertaking that they will be re-examined by the Northern Ireland Office and the Treasury

We made clear our intention to pursue this matter, if necessary, through the dispute mechanism.

Child Poverty Strategy

Mr S Hamilton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the timescale for the implementation of the Child Poverty Strategy.

(AQO 669/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The provisions of the Child Poverty Act will be a significant step towards focusing efforts within government to meet our challenging Programme for Government commitment of eradicating child poverty by 2020.

The provisions of the Act specifically require us to produce and present to the Assembly, by 24 March 2011, a Child Poverty Strategy. The strategy will outline those actions that departments here are taking to ensure its associated targets are met.

The Act further places an ongoing requirement for child poverty strategies to be produced every three years and for annual reports to be made to the Assembly.

Our officials have been progressing the necessary work in this area and following a successful pre-consultation stakeholder event in September, the draft strategy has been issued today for a period of formal public consultation.

The public consultation period, during which we will be seeking the views of all stakeholders, including children and young people themselves, will conclude on 6 February 2011.

Following an assessment of the consultation responses, the updated draft strategy will be shared with departments and the OFMDFM Committee for consideration before being laid before the Assembly in March 2011.

Children's Issues

Mr R Beggs asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the demise of cross-cutting funding for children's issues, for their assessment of how effectively these issues are being addressed by Departments and the Executive collectively.

(AQO 671/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We established the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People with the ultimate aim of improving the lives of our children and young people.

Through the workings of this cross-departmental Committee, the six key outcome areas contained in the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People are placed at the heart of Government's agenda.

The Champions for Children and Young People act as a senior point of contact within departments in relation to the Ministerial Sub-Committee and help to take forward agreed policy.

Additionally, all Ministers are committed to the Programme for Government and delivering on the associated PSA targets, and the Ministerial Sub-Committee provides a forum to co-operate in meeting these targets.

It is, of course, for each Minister to manage the funding allocation for their own department and this joint working does not compromise the respective roles and responsibilities of individual Ministers.

Our own department does not deliver direct services to children and young people and therefore the majority of the key issues requiring action will fall to, and require funding by, other departments. We will continue to encourage departmental Ministers to keep children and young people's issues high on their list of priorities.

We will be tabling the issue of budget implications for children's services for discussion at the next meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee and the Children's Champions group.

Whilst future departmental budget allocations are not yet known, whatever the outcome, we will continue to promote children and young people's issues and to highlight the need to jointly improve outcomes in key areas of our children and young people's lives.

Investment Strategy

Mr S Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any recent discussions they have had with the UK Government about the Investment Strategy.

(AQO 673/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We wrote to the Prime Minister on 28 October to ask for a meeting to discuss the Spending Review and the assurances given about the £18 billion funding commitment made by the former Prime Minister in 2007 and agreed by the then Chancellor following the St Andrews Agreement.

In his response, the Prime Minister said that the Treasury were confident that his government is on course to deliver the £18 billion package. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that the Executive will have invested £9.8 billion by the end of 2010/11. However, all of this is at odds with our understanding. The Finance Minister met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on Wednesday 1 December to discuss this issue.

Child Poverty Strategy

Mr S Neeson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Child Poverty Strategy.

(AQO 674/11)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The provisions of the Child Poverty Act will be a significant step towards focusing efforts within government to meet our challenging Programme for Government commitment of eradicating child poverty by 2020.

The provisions of the Act specifically require us to produce and present to the Assembly, by 24 March 2011, a Child Poverty Strategy. The strategy will outline those actions that departments are taking to ensure its associated targets are met.

The Act further places an ongoing requirement for child poverty strategies to be produced every three years and for annual reports to be made to the Assembly.

Our officials have been progressing the necessary work in this area and following a successful pre-consultation stakeholder event in September, the draft strategy has been issued today for a period of formal public consultation.

The public consultation period, during which we will be seeking the views of all stakeholders, including children and young people themselves, will conclude on 6 February 2011.

Following an assessment of the consultation responses, the updated draft strategy will be shared with departments and the OFMDFM Committee for consideration before being laid before the Assembly in March 2011.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Horses

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why horses are not considered to be rural or farm animals; and whether she has any plans to seek its redesignation and the inclusion of horses within her remit.

(AQW 2318/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Horses are not considered to be agricultural animals as they are not defined as such in the Agriculture Act (NI) 1949.

The re-designation of the horse is one of a number of issues identified for consideration in the “Strategy for the Equine Industry in Northern Ireland”, developed by the equine sector and supported and published by my Department in March 2007. The actions from the Strategy are to be delivered through the Equine Council for NI (ECNI). I expect this particular issue to be taken forward by ECNI in due course.

Brucellosis Outbreak in Keady

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether a DNA sample was extracted from the brucellosis-infected foetus which was dumped on farmland in Keady; and whether this has led to the identification of the herd from which the foetus came.

(AQW 2337/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The foetus was found on farmland in Lislea, Co. Armagh, geographically separate from Keady. DNA analysis was carried out on the foetus and comparison made with stored samples from previous reactor animals and with new samples from current breakdowns. To date 2135 samples have been compared with the foetal DNA, none has provided a match. Relevant samples will continue to be compared to the foetal sample.

Brucellosis Outbreak in Keady

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the brucellosis outbreak in Keady, the date on which the first case of the infection was confirmed.

(AQW 2339/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The first outbreak of Brucellosis was confirmed this year on 21 January 2010 from an animal test carried out on 12 January. Hitherto, infection had not been confirmed in the area since September 2006. The last confirmed outbreak of disease in the Keady Control Zone was reported on 17 August 2010.

Brucellosis Outbreak in Keady

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the particular strain of brucellosis found in the infected foetus dumped on farmland in Keady has been identified; and when the last incidence of this strain was found in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2340/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The dumped foetus was found on farmland in Lislea, Co. Armagh in late December 2009. Using molecular strain typing techniques at AFBI Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, the *Brucella abortus* culture from the foetus was identified as Strain 12, in the nomenclature system used by AFBI.

This strain was first seen in a single breakdown in Enniskillen in 2006; in 2007 and 2008 it had been identified in 31 separate breakdowns. By 2009, it was considered to be on the wane, with only 4 confirmed breakdowns showing this strain, prior to the foetus in late December.

However, in 2010, of the 24 confirmed breakdowns, 20 have been classified as strain 12. The most recent example was found in August of this year.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many interns her Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2356/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: For 2010/11 the Department received no requests to facilitate interns.

For 2011/12 the Department has been approached by two interns. Options are currently being considered for facilitating one formal request and an informal enquiry from another is being dealt with.

Northern Ireland Scrapie Plan

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much has been spent on the Northern Ireland Scrapie Plan in each of the last four years.

(AQW 2464/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The table below shows the total spend on the NI Scrapie Plan in each of the last four years.

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010
Total Spend (£)	348,057	209,057	152,513	111,427*

(* up to and including 30 November 2010)

Scrapie

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she intends to eradicate scrapie in the sheep flock.

(AQW 2465/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Scrapie is a complex disease which by its nature can lay dormant for a number of years. The aim of my Department's scrapie programme is to eliminate scrapie from the sheep flock in the north of Ireland. Current control measures have seen a steady decline in the incidents of scrapie since a high of 16 classical and 2 atypical incidents in 2006. One incident of classical scrapie was identified in 2009 and there have been no cases identified to date this year.

Under the 2008 TSE Regulations, scrapie in sheep and goats is a notifiable disease and as such suspicion of the disease must be reported to my Department. Movement restrictions are placed on suspect flocks and herds and if scrapie is confirmed a compulsory programme of controls under the Compulsory Scrapie Flocks Scheme will take place in accordance with EU 999/2001 and domestic legislation. Under this Scheme my Department will genotype, kill and destroy scrapie susceptible sheep and goats and TSE sample a proportion of those animals destroyed. All fallen and human consumption sheep and goats over 18 months from the flock or herd will be TSE sampled for a two year period following the scrapie outbreak. In addition, movement restrictions to and from the flock or herd will remain in place for a minimum of two years, during which time only sheep or goats with scrapie resistant genotypes may be moved in or out.

My Department also implements monitoring control measures for a two year period on a flock/herd following confirmation of atypical scrapie.

In accordance with EU requirements my Department also undertakes an annual surveillance programme in which a random sample of fallen sheep and goats and sheep for human consumption are TSE sampled and tested.

The new TSE Regulations, which will come into force later this month in the north, will provide for additional powers to restrict the movement of milk from sheep flocks and goat herds where classical scrapie is suspected or confirmed.

Scrapie

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many cases of scrapie have been identified in each of the last four years.

(AQW 2466/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have provided in the table below the number of classical and atypical scrapie cases identified in each of the last four years and the number of flocks affected.

Year	Classical		Atypical	
	No. of cases	No. of flocks affected	No. of cases	No. of flocks affected
2007	4	2	3	3
2008	1	1*	2	2
2009	1	1*	0	0
2010	0	0	0	0

(* This was the same flock in which a case of classical scrapie was identified in each of these years.)

Artworks

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the value of the artworks that her Department currently has (i) on display; and (ii) in storage.

(AQW 2574/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The only artwork on display or in storage in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development belongs to Properties Division in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), which manages the NICS Art Collection. As the artwork is a DFP asset, DFP will provide the required information on artworks on loan to this and any other NICS Departments in responding to this question.

Northern Ireland Executive's European Office in Brussels

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any communication her Department has had with the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels in each of the past 24 months.

(AQW 2627/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I refer to my previous answer to AQW 1620/10. The Executive's Brussels office is an important resource offering key support on European matters. My Department has a member of staff based in that office who is dedicated to dealing with agri-food, veterinary, fisheries and rural development issues. There has been daily contact between DARD staff based in the north of Ireland and the DARD staff member in Brussels over the last two years on issues ranging right across my Department's responsibilities.

Woodland Creation

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the Public Service Agreement target for the conversion of an additional 1650 hectares of agricultural and non-agricultural land to woodland by March 2011 is likely to be achieved.

(AQW 2645/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The current Programme for Government (PfG) target for woodland creation was always going to be a challenging target, not least because of the current pressures faced by farmers and landowners. By the end of November this year, 655 hectares of new woodland have been created. This is less than I had planned at this stage of the PfG period, and it is now unlikely that the woodland creation target will be achieved by March 2011. However, I remain committed to the long term aim of the Forestry Strategy of doubling the area of woodland in the north of Ireland. In November last year, I announced increases in grant rates of up to 30 per cent and since

then, there has been a steep rise in the area of woodland creation applied for - 70 % higher compared with the same period last year. I expect this increased interest in applications to result in more woodland creation, but not all of which will be in the PfG target period. My Department will increase its efforts to promote woodland creation, recognising the many benefits it offers for the people of the north of Ireland.

Woodland Creation

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many hectares of woodland have been created in each year since 2007.

(AQW 2646/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The area of woodland created under my Department's Woodland Grant Scheme since 2007 is 1,054 hectares and for each year, is as follows:

Year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Total
Area (hectares)	552	289	213	1054

Rural Development Programme Funding

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 2454/11, whether a deadline exists for the submission to the EU of any changes in the Department's delivery structure for the distribution of Rural Development Programme funding; and how long before any deadline will she consult with Local Action Groups on possible changes.

(AQW 2657/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I advised in response to AQW 2454/11, I have asked officials to undertake a review of Axis 3 delivery and of what and where the blockages are. This work will review processes and procedures within the operation of the programme not its structure.

The Mid Term Evaluation of the programme has recently been submitted to the EU Commission in advance of its end of December 2010 deadline, however there is no EU deadline for submission of any changes to implementation of Axis 3 or other changes to the programme.

I will as explained, receive a report from officials later this month. Where practices need changed to improve efficiency of delivery these will be introduced in consultation with Joint Council Committees and Local Action Groups.

Budget: DARD

Rev Dr R Coulter asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her Department's budget proposals.

(AQO 690/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The outcome of the Spending Review means that we know the level of budget available to the Executive at Block level. The Executive's Budget Review Group continues to assess the implications of this for the wider budget. It is too early to say with certainty what this will mean for the DARD budget. However, with less money available, the Executive will have to make savings, and DARD will be expected to play its part. During the Budget period 2011-2015, the Department faces a number of challenges. Evidently, there is a risk that there will be insufficient resources to carry forward the current level of services and meet customer expectations. My priority is to maintain the efficient provision of priority front line services, and bear down on administration. At this stage, it is too early to say how my Department would deliver any savings the Executive decides upon and it would be premature to speculate further.

Agriculture: Bureaucracy

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures her Department has taken to reduce bureaucracy in the agricultural industry.

(AQO 703/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department issued its response to the Better Regulation Review on 18 May 2010. Since then the department has been actively taking forward an extensive programme of work to give effect to the 61 recommendations put forward by the Independent Panel which have been accepted or accepted in principle.

Part of my department's response was a commitment to develop an action plan to implement, monitor and review the accepted recommendations. Systems have been put in place which will measure these outcomes in due course. The action plan has been scrutinised by the ARD Committee and will be published in early December.

We have not waited until now to improve our approach, for instance we have put in place an electronic identification system for sheep and goats which was supported and welcomed by the industry.

Moreover in July 2009, we secured a very important derogation from Brussels benefiting flock keepers with the introduction of the sheep electronic identification system (EID); the concession provides central points of recording reducing the administrative burden on flockkeepers, who will not need in general to purchase EID readers. More than 1,100 sheep farmers attended EID training events in 13 markets across the north, this was in addition to information evenings delivered by staff from CAFRE, Veterinary Service and Animal Health and Welfare policy.

I can assure you that I and my department remain committed to reducing the level of red tape. There is also evidence that farmers are reacting positively to new initiatives for example the new application process for the Farm Modernisation Programme. The Department received approximately 7000 on-line applications for Tranche 2 of the Programme and this represents in the region of 90% of the total applications submitted. This is another real step forward in reducing the time and cost farmers are asked to spend on paperwork.

As you are aware my Department has committed to a PSA Target to reduce the administrative burden on the agri-food sector by 25% by 2013 – with an interim target of 15% by 2011. I have put in place a dedicated Better Regulation Advisory Unit within the Department which is providing a strong advisory and co-ordination function across all departmental business areas to support the work towards achieving the very challenging targets we have set ourselves.

Townland Names

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the progress made by her Department in promoting the use of townland names.

(AQO 695/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I have previously stated I very much recognise and value the historic, cultural and linguistic importance of townland names, particularly to the rural community. They are a significant part of our shared local heritage and I am therefore keen to support their promotion and preservation.

My Department moved to include townland names within the addresses of all DARD offices in March of this year. This was in response to an initiative being undertaken by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, under your chairmanship.

Guidance along with a list of DARD Offices and the relevant townland name,

was issued to all business areas in my Department to advise them of this change and to ensure that it was implemented appropriately.

In order to minimise waste and save cost changes to the address have been phased in as current supplies of pre-printed documents, including headed paper, compliment slips, business cards, pre-printed paid envelopes and other pre-printed forms, are exhausted.

Both the Department's Customer Information System (CIS) and Grants & Subsidies System (G&S) have the townland name as part of the DARD building/office addresses.

The CIS system is the system on which customer data is maintained and staff have the facility to incorporate a townland into an address if the customer so wishes.

The legacy Grants & Subsidies system is the system on which farm business data is maintained and staff have the facility to incorporate a townland into an address if the customer so wishes. This business data is copied to the CIS system on a daily basis.

Any new application that is developed on CIS, therefore, can make use of this information on screen or on paper forms.

Dogs (Amendment) Bill

Mr P Butler asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress made on the Dogs (Amendment) Bill.

(AQO 698/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Dogs (Amendment) Bill, which I introduced in the Assembly last May, remains one of my key priorities. The Bill has now completed its Committee stage and I want to thank the Committee for their hard work in scrutinising the Bill.

The Bill introduces compulsory microchipping making it more likely that lost or stolen dogs will be returned to their owners. The Bill also includes a system of control conditions to improve the management of problem dogs. Taken together, microchipping and control conditions will increase the accountability of dog owners and help reduce many of the problems caused by irresponsible owners.

The Bill will also introduce a long-overdue rise in the cost of a dog licence (from £5 to £12.50) and so increase the resources available to council dog warden services. In addition, irresponsible owners will face stiffer fixed penalties as a result of the Bill. Finally, the Bill recognises the rights of other pet owners to be protected by making it an offence to set a dog on or let it attack and injure any domestic animal.

I have agreed some amendments with the Committee, which I believe will result in the legislation being stronger, and will, in turn, further improve the dog control system established by the 1983 Dogs Order.

It is my hope that the Bill will move to Consideration stage very shortly and, with the support of the Assembly, to be enacted by spring next year.

EU Quotas: Farming and Fishing

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the impact that European quotas currently have on dairy farmers and fishermen.

(AQO 699/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In recent years milk quotas have become increasingly irrelevant across the EU. Provisional data for the 2009/10 milk quota year indicates that deliveries were 7% below quota. A similar position pertained in Britain and here where in 2009/10 production was 1.77 billion litres or 12% below quota. However, in the current milk quota year up to the end of October 2010 there has been an increase in production of 297 million litres compared to the same period last year which, although still well below quota levels, indicates that dairy farmers are now more responsive to market signals than to quota restraints. This is a welcome development which should enable the dairy industry to build a sustainable future.

With regard to fish quotas, these are established not for marketing reasons, but to protect fish stocks from overfishing. Fish quotas are set after consideration of the scientific assessments of fish stocks by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas. Across European waters many fish stocks are considered to be fished above sustainable levels and such stocks are therefore subject to annual quota reductions. The health of the stock determines the quota and this in turn determines the size of the fishing fleet and its support industry.

Woodland

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to ensure that there is no further net loss of ancient or long-established woodland.

(AQO 700/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's Forest Service developed a strategy in 2008 for the management of ancient and long established woodland, identified on the Ancient Woodland Inventory, within its forests. Forest Service implements this strategy by protecting ancient and long established woodland remnant features and reinforcing existing habitat networks in such woodland. This work is agreed in conjunction with Forest Service management plans.

Increased protection for ancient and long established woodland, outside Forest Service managed woodland, will be provided by new measures that are included in the Forestry Act (NI) 2010. The Act requires the Department to have regard to maintaining the special character of ancient and long established woodland when considering applications for felling licences.

Potatoes

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the local potato industry is in a position to benefit from the demand from Russia for Irish potatoes.

(AQO 701/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The local ware potato industry is responding to increased demand for Irish potatoes from Russia. Exporters from the local industry have fulfilled an initial export order for ware potatoes. Officials from my department worked in support of this trade through inspections and assistance to ensure the consignment complies with the Russian plant health regulations.

Rural Development Programme

Mr P Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking to reduce bureaucracy in the Rural Development Programme so that funding can be easily accessed.

(AQO 702/11)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am pleased to reiterate my determination to cut all unnecessary bureaucracy from my Department, including from the Rural Development Programme. I do not accept that there is too much bureaucracy. In fact, access to funding under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme is easier than under any previous programme, thanks to an extremely simple application form.

That simplified application process has yielded substantial applications, and at a rate that none of us could have anticipated; in fact, there have been over 3,300 applications under the Axis so far.

The same philosophy holds true for the other elements in the RDP. In particular, I draw the Member's attention to the simplified online application system for the second tranche of the Farm Modernisation Programme; the computerisation of the application process for agri-environment schemes; and the introduction of telephone applications

My officials are aware of their responsibilities to the rural public in this regard, and I remain personally committed to the simplest application and assessment process possible within the legal framework of an EU programme.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2393/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): DCAL has made no expenditure on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.

Agenda NI

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department and its agencies have spent on (i) articles and adverts in Agenda NI; (ii) subscriptions to Agenda NI; and (iii) payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences since May 2007.

(AQW 2472/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the period May 2007 to November 2010, the Department has paid the following amounts in relation to the Agenda NI publication and conferences organised by BMF Conferences:

Articles and adverts in Agenda NI	Subscriptions to Agenda NI	Conferences organised by BMF Conferences
£795	£35	£5,780

Libraries in North Antrim and East Antrim

Mr P Frew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of (i) visitors to; (ii) members of; and (iii) books lent by each library in (a) North Antrim; and (b) East Antrim in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2532/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The tables at Annex A show the number of people who visited, are members of, and the number of books lent by each library in the North Antrim area in each of the last three years. The libraries within the North Antrim Parliamentary Constituency are; Ballymena, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Broughshane, Cushendall, Kells & Connor, Kilrea and Portglenone.

The tables at Annex B show the number of people who visited, are members of, and the number of books lent by each library in the East Antrim area in each of the last three years. The libraries within the East Antrim Parliamentary Constituency are; Carnlough, Carrickfergus, Cloughfern, Greenisland, Larne and Whitehead.

ANNEX A**TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO VISITED EACH LIBRARY IN NORTH ANTRIM IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE YEARS.**

Location	(i) Number of Visits		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Ballycastle Library	46,110	48,921	54,116
Ballymena Central Library	173,087	168,869	166,531
Ballymoney Library	71,098	67,408	69,090
Broughshane Library	25,364	17,346	17,509
Cushendall Library	19,086	14,817	16,844
Kells & Connor Library	15,819	16,877	13,377
Portglenone Library	18,552	15,033	13,363

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF ACTIVE MEMBERS OF EACH LIBRARY IN NORTH ANTRIM IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE YEARS.

Location	(ii) Number of Active Members		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Ballycastle Library	2,874	854	1,405
Ballymena Central Library	11,549	3,530	5,011
Ballymoney Library	5,455	1,650	2,361
Broughshane Library	1,541	395	592
Cushendall Library	1,283	428	509
Kells & Connor Library	1,008	329	377
Portglenone Library	1,349	402	579

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF BOOKS LENT BY EACH LIBRARY IN NORTH ANTRIM IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE YEARS.

Location	(iii) Number of Books Lent		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Ballycastle Library	30,600	32,197	32,005
Ballymena Central Library	102,520	105,731	107,223
Ballymoney Library	58,951	59,036	57,189
Broughshane Library	17,539	18,336	15,858
Cushendall Library	17,108	18,514	16,363
Kells & Connor Library	12,429	10,880	7,680
Portglenone Library	13,214	15,171	14,320

ANNEX B**TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO VISITED EACH LIBRARY IN EAST ANTRIM IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE YEARS.**

Location	(i) Number of Visits		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Carnlough Library	14,092	15,117	17,300
Carrickfergus Library	152,203	147,267	139,780
Cloughfern Library	32,612	36,673	34,895
Greenisland Library	32,029	33,763	37,970
Larne Library	90,630	100,744	103,723
Whitehead Library	33,070	32,206	14,100*

* Based on a sample week as per CIPFA methodology

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF EACH LIBRARY IN EAST ANTRIM IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE YEARS.

Location	(ii) Number of Active Members		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Carnlough Library	650	218	306
Carrickfergus Library	8,129	2,368	3,438
Cloughfern Library	1,742	463	695
Greenisland Library	1,857	537	901
Larne Library	6,278	1,822	2,869
Whitehead Library	2,212	559	802

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF BOOKS LENT BY EACH LIBRARY IN NORTH ANTRIM IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE YEARS.

Location	(iii) Number of Books Lent		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Carnlough Library	6,650	6,919	7,807
Carrickfergus Library	79,527	79,723	80,441
Cloughfern Library	17,132	16,010	14,845
Greenisland Library	19,578	21,145	21,771
Larne Library	66,070	64,207	66,120
Whitehead Library	22,429	22,323	18,259

HMS Caroline

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions departmental officials have had with other Departments, non-departmental public bodies, agencies, the Royal Navy and others

in relation to the importance of the HMS Caroline in the portrayal of Belfast's maritime history and the addition of the ship to the range of attractions displayed in the Queen's Island area of the Titanic Quarter.

(AQW 2579/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have been fully appraised by my departmental officials on the issues surrounding HMS Caroline and I am aware of the growing interest in our maritime heritage. As you will appreciate Maritime heritage covers a wide range of activities and the engagement of various stakeholders.

Regarding discussions at official level pertaining to HMS Caroline, on 20 January 2010 the former DCAL Permanent Secretary convened a meeting, on a without prejudice basis, to discuss the options for the vessel. The meeting involved Royal Navy stakeholders and local stakeholders such as Belfast City Council (BCC), the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the Belfast Harbour Commission (BHC). You will note that no further similar meeting has been held although the various stakeholders have continued discussions on the issues in various formats.

The consensus stakeholder view was that the future of the vessel could not be viewed in isolation but needed to be considered as part of a wider strategy for maritime heritage. Consequently BCC, NITB and DSD, who are all making very significant investments in Belfast's Titanic and maritime heritage, commissioned a study by CHL Consulting Company Ltd.

It is my understanding that the Belfast Titanic and Maritime Heritage Strategy will soon be finalised.

Northern Ireland Executive's European Office in Brussels

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any communication his Department has had with the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels in each of the past 24 months.

(AQW 2626/11)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has not communicated directly with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) during the past two years.

However, periodically ONIEB issue updates on issues which they feel may be of interest to DCAL.

Department of Education

Sure Start Programme

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister of Education how many children who are severely or profoundly deaf are currently receiving educational services through the Sure Start Programme.

(AQW 2426/11)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Léiríonn taifid a choinnítear mar chuid de na Cláir Tús Cinnte go bhfuil 9 páistí ag freastal i mbliana a bhfuil bodhaire throm orthu nó atá faoi ollbhodhaire, agus tá measúnú á dhéanamh ar pháiste amháin eile faoi láthair.

Records maintained within Sure Start Programmes indicate that there are 9 children attending in the current year who are severely or profoundly deaf, with one other child currently undergoing assessment. Sure Start offers support for all children within the designated community, recognising their differing needs. Children with a hearing impairment receive a range of Sure Start services depending on the particular age and needs of the child, and the specific needs of the family.

Agenda NI

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Education how much her Department and its agencies have spent on (i) articles and adverts in Agenda NI; (ii) subscriptions to Agenda NI; and (iii) payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences since May 2007.

(AQW 2507/11)

Minister of Education: Thabhaigh mo Roinn na costais seo a leanas i ngach bliain le trí bliana airgeadais anuas:

My Department incurred the following costs in each of the past three financial years:

	Articles and adverts in Agenda NI	Subscriptions to Agenda NI	BMF Business Services
2007-08	£Nil	£34.90	£1,115.00
2008-09	£Nil	£34.90	£1,470.00
2009-10	£Nil	£34.90	£1,875.00

The payments to BMF Business Services include amounts for Department of Education staff attending conferences, seminars and courses.

Substitute Teachers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers, working as substitute teachers, who have not yet been in a full-time permanent position, in each of the last three academic years, broken down by gender.

(AQW 2537/11)

Minister of Education: Le trí bliana acadúla anuas, fostaíodh 3,659 múinteoir san iomlán, is é sin 2,961 bean agus 698 fear, mar mhúinteoirí ionaid ach chan mar mhúinteoirí buana lánaimseartha. Tugtar na figiúirí mar líonta iomlána mar gur féidir go ndearna cuid de na múinteoirí seo ionadaíocht i ngach bliain den trí bliana acadúla sin.

In the last three academic years, a total of 3,659 teachers, 2961 female and 698 male, have been employed in a substitute capacity but not in a full-time permanent position. The figures are provided as a total as it is possible that any number of these teachers has substituted in each of the last three years.

Realignment of GCE A Level Equivalents

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) any correspondence which her Department or the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment have had with the Irish Universities Association in relation to re-aligning GCE A Level equivalents for entry to university in the Republic of Ireland, to take account of the introduction of the A* grade at GCE A2 Level; (ii) her Department's response to any such correspondence; and (iii) what action she intends to take to ensure that students from Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged.

(AQW 2540/11)

Minister of Education: Last February my Department asked the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), in its capacity as Qualifications Regulator, to investigate the matter of the revised university admissions points arrangements for A level grades being adopted in the south for 2010.

CCEA wrote to the Irish Universities Association (IUA) to obtain the rationale behind these arrangements and subsequently to express concern that – as the new A* grade had been introduced to reward outstanding achievement, rather than replace the existing A grade – the revised admissions points arrangements appeared to represent a significant disadvantage to holders of GCE qualifications in applying for places in universities in the south.

The response from the IUA indicated that the decision on the points arrangements had been taken following a review of GCE A Level equivalences and had been approved by the individual academic governing authorities of the universities.

I place the utmost importance on equality of opportunity for all our young people and it is unacceptable for students from the north to be placed at a disadvantage. I therefore wrote to Batt O'Keefe TD and, more recently, his successor as Minister for Education and Skills, Mary Coughlan TD expressing my concern about this matter.

As siocair gurb iad na hollscoileanna i ndeisceart na hÉireann a dhéanann cinntí ar an cheist seo shocraigh mé gur chóir do CCEA leanúint leis an teagmháil le Cumann Ollscoileanna Éireann, d'fhonn comhionannas rochtana ar ollscoileanna an deiscirt a chinntiú do mhic léinn ó gach cuid den oileán.

As decisions on this rest with the Irish universities I have agreed that CCEA should continue to engage with the IUA, with a view to ensuring equality of access to universities in the south for students from across the whole island of Ireland.

Irish Language Qualifying Examination

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education for an update on progress made in providing initial and in-service training for the Irish Language Qualifying Examination for teachers from Northern Ireland who wish to teach in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 2541/11)

Minister of Education: Beidh a fhios agat go gcaithfidh múinteoirí Bunscoile a bhfuil cáilíocht oideachais mhúinteoirí déanta acu taobh amuigh de dheisceart na hÉireann (seachas na múinteoirí sin a rinne an Teastas Iarchéime san Oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge nó an cúrsa ceithre bliana Baitsiléir san Oideachas le Gaeilge ag Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire Béal Feirste), beidh a fhios agat go gcaithfidh siad Triail Inniúlachta (SCG - An Scrúdú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge) nó Tréimhse Oiriúnaithe (OCG – Oiriúnú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge) a dhéanamh lena dheimhniú go bhfuil sé ar chumas an iarratasóra Gaeilge a theagasc agus réimse na n-ábhar ar churaclam na mbunscoileanna a theagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge. Ceadaítear clárúchán coinníollach na Comhairle Mhúinteoireachta agus tugtar uastréimhse de thrí bliana ó dháta an chlárúcháin leis an Triail Inniúlachta nó an Tréimhse Oiriúnaithe a dhéanamh. Nuair a fhaightear an SCG nó an OCG, aithnítear na múinteoirí sin mar mhúinteoirí láncháilíthe sa deisceart.

You will be aware that Primary teachers who have completed a programme of teacher education outside of the south of Ireland (with the exception of the Post Graduate Certificate in Education through the medium of Irish or the four year Bachelor of Education Irish academic course at St. Mary's University College Belfast), must complete an Aptitude Test (SCG - An Scrúdú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge) or Adaptation Period (OCG – Oiriúnú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge) which confirms that the applicant is competent to teach the Irish language and to teach the range of primary school curricular subjects through the medium of Irish. Conditional Teaching Council registration is granted and a maximum period of three years from date of registration is set for the completion of the Aptitude Test or the Adaptation Period. On attainment of the SCG or OCG, such teachers are then recognised as fully qualified in the south.

In the case of post-primary schools, the Irish language requirement only applies to teachers employed in Gaeltacht schools, in Irish-medium schools, and to teachers who teach any subject through the medium of Irish.

The 5 Higher Education Institutions in the North were asked if they would be interested in providing, on a full cost recovery basis, SCG courses to interested individuals (including both qualified teachers and student teachers). Both St Mary's University College and the University of Ulster expressed an interest. A meeting was held in Dublin on 10 November 2010 at which Marino College of Education (which currently co-ordinates the delivery of the SCG in the South on behalf of DES) provided St Mary's and the University of Ulster with an overview of the contents of the course, including details of resource materials and assessment procedures.

St Mary's and the University of Ulster are now giving further consideration as to whether or not they wish to deliver the SCG course. Further meetings with St Mary's University College and the University of Ulster will take place in the near future on the way forward.

Strandtown Primary School

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the recent review of the proposed capital works project for Strandtown Primary School to indicate which of the planning principles of the Independent Strategic Review of Education were not fulfilled.

(AQW 2544/11)

Minister of Education: The Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education undertaken by Sir George Bain was published in 2006 and subsequently informed some of DE policies which were a key focus of the Capital Review. The aims of the capital review, as defined in the Terms of Reference, were 'to ensure capital investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the current DE policy framework, including Every School a Good School, Revised Curriculum, Entitlement Framework, Sustainable Schools, and the Irish Medium Review'.

I dtaca le Strandtown Primary School de, dhíreoinn aird an chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé cheana féin de bhun AQW 2277/11.

In regard to Strandtown Primary School, I refer the member to my previous answer pursuant to AQW 2277/11.

Proposed Closures

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the process in place for consulting parents on the proposed closure of a preparatory school.

(AQW 2563/11)

Minister of Education: Any significant change in the character or size of a school, including a proposed closure of a preparatory department of a grammar school, requires the publication of a development proposal. The main purpose of the development proposal process is to ensure that all interested parties are informed about the proposed changes and that they have an opportunity to comment before decisions are taken by the Minister.

Sula bhfoilsítear moladh forbartha, bíonn ceanglas reachtúil ar an mholtóir dul i ndáil chomhairle le Boird Ghobharnóirí, le tuismitheoirí agus le múinteoirí. Nuair a fhoilsítear moladh forbartha, bíonn tréimhse reachtúil dhá mhí ann agus is féidir le duine ar bith tuairimí ar an mholadh a chur in iúl don Roinn le linn na tréimhse seo.

Prior to the publication of the development proposal, there is a statutory requirement for the proposer to consult with Boards of Governors, parents and teachers. Once a development proposal is published, there is also a statutory 2-month period during which whoever wishes to do so may offer their views on the proposal to the Department.

The Guidance on Development Proposals (available on the Department's website) states that 'it is particularly recommended that all parents should be notified individually in writing, by the proposer of the development proposal, of the effects which the proposal would have for the education of their children'.

Connor House Preparatory School, Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education whether an Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on the proposed closure of Connor House Preparatory School, Bangor.

(AQW 2564/11)

Minister of Education: Rachaidh druidim bheartaithe Connor House Preparatory School tríd an phróiseas reachtúil molta forbartha. As siocair go gcuimsíonn an próiseas reachtúil seo comhairliúchán cuimsitheach

agus as siocair go gcaithfidh an Roinn aird chuí a thabhairt dá cuid dualgas faoi Alt 75 den NI Act 1998 agus an moladh forbartha á bhreithniú aici, níl aon cheanglas ar an Roinn Measúnacht Tionchair Chomhionannais ar leith a dhéanamh.

The proposed closure of Connor House Preparatory School will be progressed through the statutory development proposal process. As this statutory process includes a comprehensive consultation exercise and the Department, in considering the development proposal, will have proper regard to its duties under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, there is no requirement to conduct a separate Equality Impact Assessment exercise.

Primary Languages Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to including German within the Primary Languages Programme.

(AQW 2572/11)

Minister of Education: Thug mé isteach Clár na dTeangacha Bunscoile le tacaíocht a thabhairt do na bunscoileanna sin a bhí ag iarraidh nuatheangacha a theagasc. Faoi láthair, tá an Spáinnis, an Ghaeilge, agus an Pholainnis ar fáil. Níl sé beartaithe agam an Ghearmáinis a thabhairt isteach ar an chlár.

I introduced the Primary Languages Programme to provide support for those primary schools who wished to make available modern languages. Currently, Spanish, Irish, and more recently, Polish are available. I have no plans to introduce German into the programme.

It is of course open to schools to offer additional language learning opportunities outside of the Primary Languages Programme, and I am pleased that many already do so. There is a range of existing support arrangements in place for those primary schools wishing to offer German, including through the education and library boards and CCEA, which has developed material in French, German, Spanish and Irish to assist Primary teachers to develop and integrate an element of language teaching into their classrooms. These resources are available to all schools via the primary languages resource section of the Curriculum website.

Primary School Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, to list the primary schools in each Education and Library Board area which do not currently have any male teachers; and the percentage of all primary schools in Northern Ireland this figure represents.

(AQW 2584/11)

Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas le fáil sna táblaí thíos.

The information is contained in the tables below.

LIST OF PRIMARY¹ SCHOOLS WHICH DID NOT HAVE ANY MALE TEACHERS AS AT NOVEMBER 2009

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Name	Location
Ballysillan Primary School	Belfast
Belmont Primary School	Belfast
Bloomfield Collegiate Prep. Dept.	Belfast
Donegall Road Primary School	Belfast
Dundela Infants School	Belfast
Edenbrooke Primary School	Belfast

School Name	Location
Euston Street Primary School	Belfast
Forth River Primary School	Belfast
Greenwood Primary School	Belfast
Grove Primary School	Belfast
Holy Cross Girls' Primary School	Belfast
Knocknagoney Primary School	Belfast
Malvern Primary School	Belfast
St Bernadette's Primary School	Belfast
St John The Baptist Girls' Primary School	Belfast
Star Of The Sea Girls' Primary School	Belfast
Strathearn School Prep. Dept.	Belfast
Taughmonagh Primary School	Belfast
Victoria College Prep. Dept.	Belfast

NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Name	Location
Altayeskey Primary School	Magherafelt
Armoy Primary School	Ballymoney
Ballycastle Primary School	Ballycastle
Ballycraigy Primary School	Antrim
Ballyhackett Primary School	Coleraine
Ballymoney Integrated Primary School	Ballymoney
Ballynease Primary School	Ballymena
Ballytober Primary School	Bushmills
Balnamore Primary School	Ballymoney
Barnish Primary School	Ballycastle
Bellaghy Primary School	Magherafelt
Cairncastle Primary School	Larne
Carhill Integrated Primary School	Coleraine
Carnalbanagh Primary School	Ballymena
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	Ballymena
Castledawson Primary School	Magherafelt
Creavery Primary School	Antrim
Culcrow Primary School	Coleraine

School Name	Location
Culnady Primary School	Maghera
Dalriada School Prep. Dept.	Ballymoney
Damhead Primary School	Coleraine
Desertmartin Primary School	Magherafelt
Duneane Primary School	Antrim
Gaelscoil Éanna	Baile Nua na Mainistreach
Gaelscoil An Chaistil	Baile an Chaistil
Gaelscoil Na Speiríní	Machaire Fíolta
Garryduff Primary School	Ballymoney
Glynn Primary School	Larne
Gorran Primary School	Coleraine
Harryville Primary School	Ballymena
Hazelbank Primary School	Ballymena
Kilbride Primary School	Ballyclare
Kilcoan Primary School	Larne
Killowen Primary School	Coleraine
Kilmoyle Primary School	Ballymoney
Kilross Primary School	Magherafelt
Kirkinriola Primary School	Ballymena
Landhead Primary School	Ballymoney
Longstone Primary School	Ballymena
Lourdes Primary School	Carrickfergus
Maine Integrated Primary School	Randalstown
Mallusk Primary School	Newtownabbey
Moneynick Primary School	Antrim
Moorfields Primary School	Ballymena
Mullaghduh Primary School	Larne
Parkgate Primary School	Ballyclare
Rasharkin Primary School	Ballymena
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	Antrim
Silverstream Primary School	Carrickfergus
St Brigid's Primary School Tirkane	Maghera
St Ciaran's Primary School	Ballymena
St Columba's Primary School, Boleran Road	Coleraine

School Name	Location
St Columb's Primary School (Cullion)	Magherafelt
St Joseph's Primary School	Antrim
St Macnisius' Primary School	Antrim
St Mary's Primary School	Ballycastle
St Mary's Primary School, Ballymena Road	Ballymena
St Olcan's Primary School	Ballymoney
St Paul's Primary School	Ballymena
Straidbilly Primary School	Ballymoney
Straidhavern Primary School	Crumlin
The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Primary School	Ballymoney
Thompson Primary School	Ballyclare
Tildarg Primary School	Ballyclare
Tír-Na-Nóg Primary School	Ballyclare
Toreagh Primary School	Larne
Upper Ballyboley Primary School	Ballyclare
Woodburn Primary School	Carrickfergus

SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Name	Location
Alexander Dickson Primary School	Newtownards
Ballycloughan Primary School	Saintfield
Ballykeigle Primary School	Newtownards
Ballyvester Primary School	Donaghadee
Ballywalter Primary School	Newtownards
Carr Primary School	Lisburn
Carrickmannon Primary School	Newtownards
Cedar Integrated Primary School	Crossgar
Cumran Primary School	Downpatrick
Down High School Prep. Dept.	Downpatrick
Dunmurry Primary School	Belfast
Friends School Prep. Dept.	Lisburn
Glenlola Collegiate Prep. Dept.	Bangor
Hollywood Primary School	Hollywood
Killyleagh Primary School	Downpatrick

School Name	Location
Lead Hill Primary School	Belfast
Newcastle Primary School	Newcastle
Redburn Primary School	Hollywood
Regent House School Prep. Dept.	Newtownards
St Caolan's Primary School	Ballynahinch
St Joseph's Primary School, Ballycruttle Road	Downpatrick
St Macartan's Primary School	Downpatrick
St Malachy's Primary School	Newry
St Mary's Primary School	Saintfield
Tonagh Primary School	Lisburn
Victoria Primary School (Ballyhalbert)	Newtownards

SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Name	Location
Aghavilly Primary School	Armagh
Anamar Primary School	Newry
Augher Central Primary School	Augher
Ballylifford Primary School	Cookstown
Ballytrea Primary School	Dungannon
Birches Primary School	Craigavon
Bleary Primary School	Craigavon
Blessed Patrick O'loughran Primary School	Dungannon
Bush Primary School	Dungannon
Carntall Primary School	Clogher
Churchill Primary School	Caledon
Churchtown Primary School	Cookstown
Clare Primary School	Tandragee
Clea Primary School	Keady
Clogher Regional Primary School	Clogher
Clontifleece Primary School	Warrenpoint
Coagh Primary School	Cookstown
Cortamlet Primary School	Newry
Craigavon Primary School	Craigavon
Derrylatinee Primary School	Dungannon

School Name	Location
Donaghey Primary School	Dungannon
Donaghmore Primary School	Dungannon
Dromore Road Primary School	Warrenpoint
Drumsallen Primary School	Armagh
Dungannon Primary School	Dungannon
Hamiltonsbawn Primary School	Armagh
Keady Primary School	Armagh
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	Newry
Killeen Primary School	Newry
Killyman Primary School	Dungannon
Laghey Primary School	Dungannon
Lisferty Primary School	Dungannon
Lisnadill Primary School	Armagh
Milltown Primary School	Banbridge
Moneydarragh Primary School	Newry
Mount St Catherine's Primary School	Armagh
Mountnorris Primary School	Armagh
Moy Regional Primary School	Dungannon
Mullaghglass Primary School	Newry
Mullavilly Primary School	Tandragee
Newmills Primary School	Dungannon
Poyntzpass Primary School	Poyntzpass
Queen Elizabeth II (Pomeroy) Primary School	Dungannon
Richmond Primary School	Dungannon
Royal School Prep. Dept.	Armagh
St Brigid's (Drumilly) Primary School	Belleek
St Brigid's Primary School	Augher
St Clare's Convent Primary School	Newry
St John's Eglis Primary School	Craigavon
St John's Primary School	Newry
St Joseph's Primary School	Caledon
St Laurence O'toole's Primary School	Belleek
St Macartan's Primary School	Clogher
St Malachy's Primary School	Magherafelt

School Name	Location
St Mary's Primary School	Cookstown
St Mary's Primary School	Fivemiletown
St Patrick's Primary School	Magherafelt
St Patrick's Primary School, Ballymacbredan Road	Craigavon
St Patrick's Primary School, Longstone Road	Newry
St Patrick's Primary School, Mullanahoe Road	Dungannon
The Drelincourt Infants School	Armagh
Woods Primary School	Magherafelt

WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Name	Location
Aghadrumsee Primary School	Enniskillen
Altishane Primary School	Strabane
Artigarvan Primary School	Strabane
Ballougry Primary School	Derry
Belleek Controlled Primary School	Enniskillen
Bready Jubilee Primary School	Strabane
Bridgehill Primary School	Castledearg
Brookeborough Primary School	Enniskillen
Christ The King Primary School	Omagh
Cooley Primary School	Omagh
Cornagague Primary School	Enniskillen
Craigbrack Primary School	Derry
Cumber Claudy Primary School	Derry
Denamona Primary School	Omagh
Derrygonnelly Primary School	Enniskillen
Donemana Primary School	Strabane
Dromore Primary School	Omagh
Drumlegagh Primary School	Omagh
Drumlisk Primary School	Omagh
Drumnabey Primary School	Castledearg
Drumrane Primary School	Derry
Envagh Primary School	Omagh
Erganagh Primary School	Castledearg

School Name	Location
Evish Primary School	Strabane
Florencecourt Primary School	Enniskillen
Fountain Primary School	Derry
Gaelscoil Na Gcrann	An Ómaigh
Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh	An Srath Bán
Gillygooley Primary School	Omagh
Gortin Primary School	Omagh
Gortnagarn Primary School	Omagh
Gortnaghey Primary School	Derry
Groarty Integrated Primary School	Derry
Irvinestown Primary School	Enniskillen
Jones Memorial Primary School	Enniskillen
Kesh Primary School	Enniskillen
Killyhommon Primary School	Enniskillen
Lack Primary School	Enniskillen
Langfield Primary School	Omagh
Lisbellaw Primary School	Enniskillen
Loreto Convent Primary School	Omagh
Magilligan Primary School	Limavady
Maguiresbridge Primary School	Enniskillen
Newtownbutler Primary School	Enniskillen
Newtownstewart Model Primary School	Omagh
Queen Elizabeth II Primary School	Omagh
Recarson Primary School	Omagh
Roscavey Primary School	Omagh
St Anthony's Primary School	Limavady
St Brigid's Primary School, Glenelly Road	Omagh
St Brigid's Primary School, Lenagh Road	Omagh
St Caireall's Primary School	Castlederg
St Canice's Primary School, Glenedra Road	Derry
St Davog's Scraghey Primary School	Castlederg
St Dympna's Primary School	Omagh
St Eugene's Primary School	Enniskillen
St Eugene's Primary School	Strabane

School Name	Location
St Eugene's Primary School	Omagh
St Finlough's Primary School	Limavady
St John The Baptist Primary School	Enniskillen
St Mary's Girls' Primary School	Strabane
St Mary's Primary School, Kinoughtragh	Enniskillen
St Matthew's Primary School	Dungannon
St Naile's Primary School	Enniskillen
St Patrick's Primary School	Strabane
St Patrick's Primary School, Tonagh Road	Enniskillen
St Paul's Primary School	Enniskillen
St Peter's & St Paul's Primary School	Derry
St Teresa's Primary School	Omagh

28% of all primary¹ schools do not currently employ a male teacher.

Source: Teacher Payroll and Pensions Administration System

Note:

1. Includes preparatory departments of grammar schools.

Springhill Primary School, Belfast

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister of Education, given that her Department has categorised Springhill Primary School as 'non-compliant' with the Sustainable Schools policy, what action needs to be taken to ensure the school is fully compliant.

(AQW 2585/11)

Minister of Education: The major capital works project proposed for Springhill Primary School, rather than the school, has been categorised as 'non compliant' and the rationale for the categorisation is related to wider area issues.

Tá Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann Bhéal Feirste freagrach as eastát na scoileanna rialaithe i mBéal Feirste a phleanáil sa chéad dul síos. Tá mo Roinn ag obair go dlúth leis an Bhord d'fhonn tabhairt faoi na ceisteanna a ardaíodh san athbhreithniú. Tá an obair sin idir lámha againn go fóill.

The Belfast Education and Library Board is responsible for the planning of the controlled schools' estate in Belfast, in the first instance. My Department has been working closely with the Board, with the view to addressing the issues raised by review. This remains work in progress.

Glenwood Primary School, Belfast

Mr W Humphrey asked the Minister of Education, given that her Department has categorised Glenwood Primary School as 'partially compliant' with the Sustainable Schools policy, what action needs to be taken to ensure the school is fully compliant.

(AQW 2586/11)

Minister of Education: The major capital works project proposed for Glenwood Primary School, rather than the school itself, has been categorised as 'partially compliant' and the rationale for the categorisation was related to wider area issues.

Tá Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlann Bhéal Feirste freagrach as eastát na scoileanna rialaithe i mBéal Feirste a phleanáil sa chéad dul síos. Tá mo Roinn ag obair go dlúth leis an Bhord d'fhonn tabhairt faoi na ceistanna a ardaíodh san athbhreithniú. Tá an obair sin idir lámha againn go fóill.

The Belfast Education and Library Board is responsible for the planning of the controlled schools' estate in Belfast, in the first instance. My Department has been working closely with the Board, with the view to addressing the issues raised by review. This remains work in progress.

Guidance for Transfer

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the Guidance for Transfer issued in July by her Department which stated that the guidance applied to all Dickson Plan Schools, if she can confirm that under the guidelines schools (i) may not set unregulated, unmoderated tests; (ii) may not alter the curriculum due to testing; and (iii) should follow the guidelines in relation to sharing of information.

(AQW 2592/11)

Minister of Education: Éilítear ar gach scoil aird a thabhairt ar threoir na Roinne ar an pholasaí um aistriú iarbhunscoile.

All schools are required to have regard to the Department's guidance on post-primary transfer policy.

This guidance advises schools not to engage in the use of breakaway tests including the preparation of pupils for the sitting of such tests. It is essential that all children receive their entitlement to the revised curriculum and there must be no distorting of the curriculum as a result of preparing children for breakaway tests.

My Department continues to provide schools with advice to follow with regard to the sharing of information about pupils in connection with the transfer procedure. This advice is most commonly provided in relation to requests associated with the special circumstances procedures adopted by schools using breakaway tests. All schools, including those operating within the Dickson Plan system, should adhere to the relevant legislation and have regard to any guidance issued by the Department that relates to the sharing of information about the educational performance of pupils for the application of a school's admissions criteria.

Department for Employment and Learning

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consultation the management of the Belfast Metropolitan College carried out with all grades of staff in relation to the College Improvement Plan.

(AQW 2285/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr D Kennedy): Further Education Colleges are incorporated bodies, established under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Under the Order, each college governing body is recognised as the employing authority in its own right and all issues relating to staffing are solely matters for the governing body.

However, whilst my Department has no formal role in Belfast Metropolitan College's internal consultation process in respect of the College Improvement Plan (CIP), officials have been liaising closely with College senior management and the governing body during its development and will be establishing a monitoring group to ensure that the Plan is implemented effectively.

Through the liaison with the College, my Department is aware that the College has carried out a significant of consultation with staff at all levels. The consultation process with staff commenced in early 2010 through two separate workshops held with senior and middle management to develop a framework for a new vision and strategy. The draft strategy which resulted was then shared with staff

during focus group sessions at the College Development Day in mid February and was then put on the College internet for further inputs and comment by staff prior to finalisation.

The College has also established a Change Management Team which has taken forward the development of 6 key areas of College operations including management information systems, finance, human resources and estates. The Team organised workshops and focus groups during the development of the CIP to provide wider consultation and input with several hundred staff and students involved in these exercises. A communications strategy was also developed including a staff website which provided up to date information on the CIP and a news sheet has been published giving further details on the CIP process

A 90 day consultation process has now commenced with the College's recognised trade unions in relation to the staffing proposals set out in the College Improvement Plan and a copy was made available to union representatives and it was placed on the College website.

Subsequently, the Director met with the College's Programme Area Managers and a meeting is scheduled with the Curriculum Centre Managers to discuss the implications of the CIP. Meetings with other grades of staff will be scheduled in due course and feedback on the proposed organisational structure is being sought from the relevant managers at an individual level.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether the Belfast Metropolitan College is adhering to the agreed regional procedures for handling redundancies in institutions of further education.

(AQW 2286/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Belfast Metropolitan College has assured me that it continues to operate within the parameters of The Procedures for Handling Redundancies in Institutions of Further Education, as agreed at the Lecturers Negotiating Committee.

Teaching Irish Language in the Further Education Sector

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline whether his Department has a strategy for teaching Irish language in the further education sector.

(AQW 2314/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Whilst my Department provides strategic advice and guidance to the Further Education Sector in Northern Ireland, and channels its funding accordingly, each Further Education (FE) College is responsible for determining its own staffing and curriculum needs.

The delivery of further education in the Medium of Irish is informed by demand locally, the quality of teaching and the viability of delivering individual courses.

During the current academic year four out of the six further education Colleges have advised that they offer Irish Medium courses; approximately 18 qualifications are currently available.

Irish-medium Further Education Programmes

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list all Irish-medium further education programmes currently funded by his Department.

(AQW 2316/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: A list of all full-time and part-time Irish Medium courses delivered by the Further Education Sector during 2009/10, the last academic year for which full information is available, is attached at Annex A.

ANNEX A

- CACDP Level 1 - Certificate in Irish Sign Language

- | | |
|--|--|
| ■ CCEA Entry Level - Certificate in Irish | ■ CCEA Level 3 Advanced - Subsidiary GCE in Irish |
| ■ CCEA Entry Level - Award in Modern Language (Entry 2) (Irish) | ■ NOCN Level 1 - Award in Language Skills |
| ■ CCEA Entry Level - Award in Modern Languages (Entry 3) (Irish) | ■ NOCN Level 2- Award in Language Skills |
| ■ CCEA Level 1 - Award in Modern Languages (QCF) (Irish) | ■ NOCN Level 3 - Award in Language Skills |
| ■ CCEA Level 2 - Award in Modern Languages (QCF) (Irish) | ■ Signature Level 2 - Certificate in Irish Sign Language |
| ■ CCEA Level 1/Level 2 - GCSE in Irish | ■ Conversational Irish |
| ■ CCEA Advanced - GCE in Irish | ■ Holiday Irish |
| ■ CCEA Level 3 Advanced - GCE in Irish | ■ Irish for beginners |
| | ■ Irish for Improvers |

Graduate Internship Programmes

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.
(AQW 2323/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Through the NICS Work Experience Policy, the Department facilitated one internship from the University of Ulster from 18 August 2010 to 10 September 2010 and plans to accommodate an internship from Queen's University Belfast from 31 January 2011 to May 2011.

The Department also funds internships through its range of programmes. 145 graduates have commenced the Department's INTRO graduate management programme in the year 2010/11 to date, with a further 55 scheduled to commence before the end of March 2011. No decisions regarding future funding for the programme will be taken until the findings and recommendations of the evaluation report are known. A current evaluation of the Department's leadership and management programmes, together with ongoing budgetary considerations will contribute to decisions around the future size and direction of INTRO.

A total number of 61 graduates (59 full time and 2 part time) were supported by the Department on the recent Graduate Internship Programme (GIP). GIP ended in November 2010 and is currently being evaluated. No decisions regarding future funding for the programme will be taken until the findings and recommendations of the evaluation report are known.

Whilst the Department does not directly fund the Higher Education Institutions in relation to supporting interns, both Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster have established partnerships with a number of companies who provide scholarships to students. These scholarship packages generally include financial support, ongoing mentoring and practical experience through placements in the various workplaces. The Department does not hold information on the number of internships facilitated or planned by the Higher Education Institutions.

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much his Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.
(AQW 2430/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning has had two capital projects in the Strangford Constituency in the past three years. Both are in the Further Education sector in Newtownards and Ballynahinch.

The Newtownards Campus development capital spend (including VAT & Fees) is: £0.722m in 2008/09, £5.000m in 2009/10 and £0.744m in 2010/11.

The Ballynahinch project, which began construction in 2008, is being funded through a Public Private Partnership and has an estimated capital value of £2.5m (excluding VAT & Fees) which will be paid over the 25 year lifetime of the PPP contract.

Rapid Response NI

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the progress that has been made under Rapid Response NI.

(AQW 2449/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Rapid Response Northern Ireland (RRNI), which is being funded by my Department's Innovation Fund, was introduced during 2009 to support the employability needs of companies and individuals affected by the current economic downturn.

This 'demand led' programme, which is being led by South Eastern Regional College on behalf of the six further education colleges, has so far assisted 41 companies and 651 individuals, indicative of good progress to date.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what role his Department will have in approving the college improvements plan for Belfast Metropolitan College.

(AQW 2450/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department commissioned an Efficiency Review of Belfast Metropolitan College in 2008 which identified weaknesses within a number of key operational areas. In order to address the findings and recommendations of that review, my Department requested that the College develop a College Improvement Plan to address the weaknesses and identify those actions required to restore the College to sound financial health and stability.

Whilst the development of the Plan is the responsibility of the College, my Department has a key oversight role within the further education sector to ensure that colleges remain in good financial health. As a result, my Department has developed procedures for working with colleges that face financial difficulties and officials have met with Belfast Metropolitan College staff and governors on numerous occasions to discuss the Plan.

Following completion, the College submitted the final version of the Plan to the Department. Departmental officials scrutinised the Plan in order to ensure it was realistic, comprehensive and robust and would return the College to financial stability.

Following this detailed examination and consideration, my Department wrote formally to the College setting out its view that the Plan had considered all key elements of the College operations and, if implemented as planned, that the proposals were projected to return the College to financial stability. Overall the Plan provides the Department with confidence that the College will achieve financial stability.

The Department, however, has acknowledged the significant challenges which face the College in fully implementing its proposals and that vigilant and rigorous management action is required to ensure that the Plan is implemented effectively. To that end, therefore, the Department will be monitoring the Plan's implementation through a monitoring group made up of College representatives and Departmental officials.

Bowman Aluminium Systems Ltd, Banbridge

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance was offered by his Department, or requested by Bowman Aluminium Systems Ltd, Banbridge, for the 37 workers who lost their jobs as a result of the company's closure.

(AQW 2536/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department contacted the company on 25 November 2010 to offer advice and information on employment, training and further education opportunities to employees being made redundant. The company advised that all the employees ceased employment on 24 November 2010 and did not wish to avail of the redundancy service.

Joanne Stuart's Report 'Review of Variable Fees and Student Finance Arrangements'

Mrs D Kelly asked Minister for Employment and Learning whether Joanne Stuart will be solely responsible for updating her report 'Review of Variable Fees and Student Finance Arrangements'.
(AQW 2553/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Joanne Stuart will be solely responsible for updating her earlier report on the "Review of Variable Fees and Student Finance Arrangements in Northern Ireland". I expect to receive the update by the end of this month. Joanne will, of course, be seeking the views of key stakeholders as part of the process. I welcome the independence of this important piece of work.

Joanne Stuart's Report 'Review of Variable Fees and Student Finance Arrangements'

Mrs D Kelly asked Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the role and responsibilities, if any, of his departmental officials in relation to Joanne Stuart's report 'Review of Variable Fees and Student Finance Arrangements'.
(AQW 2554/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Officials in the Department provided limited administrative and secretariat support to Joanne Stuart as she chaired the 'Review of Variable fees and Student Finance in Northern Ireland'. This involved, for example, the provision of statistical information and financial cost comparisons, and clarification of factual content, for inclusion in the evidence based report.

Officer Training Corps

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 1770/11, if he will invite officials from the Ministry of Defence to next year's open days at universities, for the purpose of recruitment to the Officer Training Corps.
(AQW 2571/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Open Days are for prospective, rather than enrolled, students (generally sixth formers) and are scheduled to facilitate the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) process.

However, I am advised that the Officer Training Corps (OTC), along with all other Clubs and Societies, attends the annual Freshers' Fairs at Queen's University and the University of Ulster where recruitment is facilitated. Officials from the Ministry of Defence do not normally attend these events, as it is believed that recruitment is more effective when carried out by students who are themselves serving Officer Cadets.

As I stated in my response to AQW 1770/11, I am strongly supportive of the role of the Queen's University Officer Training Corps and the opportunities it provides to students from across Northern Ireland's higher education institutions.

Artworks

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the value of the artworks that his Department currently has (i) on display; and (ii) in storage.
(AQW 2623/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has one item, commissioned as an original piece of Artwork in 2007, on display in its headquarters building in Adelaide House, Belfast.

The estimated value of the piece is £2000.

All other Artwork forms part of the NICS Art Collection which is owned and managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel and will form part of their response.

Irish Language Classes for Staff

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department currently offers, or plans to offer, Irish language classes to staff.

(AQW 2651/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Irish language classes are not currently offered, or planned to be offered, to staff in the Department for Employment and Learning.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he will commit to the retention of the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme, given the decision to end the scheme in England.

(AQW 2750/11)

Minister for Employment and Learning: As you may be aware, a joint review of the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme in Northern Ireland, commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education, is currently underway to ascertain whether the scheme is continuing to meet its objectives.

On receipt of the final report, I will consider policy options relating to EMA and will ensure that any proposals for the way forward are based on sound analysis and evidence of how the scheme has met its goals.

Given the financial context, all government programmes will need to be reviewed in order to demonstrate their continuing efficiency and effectiveness. This review will provide such an evidence base for the EMA scheme.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Business Start-ups in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much has been invested in business start-ups in the Strangford constituency, in each of the last three financial years; and how many businesses have been started.

(AQW 2329/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): During the period 2007-08 to 2009-10, 272 new locally-owned businesses were supported, both directly and indirectly, by Invest NI in the Strangford Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA). These projects committed to invest almost £3m in the area.

Of these projects, 9 were supported directly by Invest NI. Table 1 shows the amount of investment committed by these projects in each of the 3 years.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI LOCAL START-UP PROJECTS IN STRANGFORD PCA (2007-08 TO 2009-10)

Fin Year	No of Start-ups	Total Planned Investment £
2007-08	3	146,710

Fin Year	No of Start-ups	Total Planned Investment £
2008-09	3	864,684
2009-10	3	337,400
Total	9	1,348,794

These 9 projects were offered support under a range of Invest NI schemes aimed at establishing not only businesses with the potential to export goods and services but also social enterprise businesses that serve the local community. According to our records, all of these businesses are still trading.

The remaining 263 projects were supported indirectly by Invest NI through the Enterprise Development Programme (EDP) (formerly the Start a Business programme), delivered in conjunction with Enterprise Northern Ireland – see Table 2.

TABLE 2: INVEST NI EDP START-UP PROJECTS IN STRANGFORD PCA (2007-08 TO 2009-10)

Fin Year	No of Start-ups	Total Planned Investment £
2007-08	117	936,000
2008-09	77	616,000
2009-10	69	-
Total	263	1,552,000

Notes:

- 1 2007-08 to 2008-09 figures are for the Start A Business Programme.
- 2 The new EDP (2009-10) does not offer financial support to establish a business but provides training, advice and guidance, therefore investment levels are not available.

There has been no analysis of the number of businesses actually started in 2007-08 and 2008-09; however, monitoring of a sample of programme participants has indicated that 79% of businesses in 2007-08 and 76% of businesses in 2008-09 were still trading.

Initial analysis of all Northern Ireland businesses assisted at the start up stage of the new EDP, which started in April 2009, found that 68% of participants had proceeded to actually start a business, and 80% of these starts were still trading.

In addition, Invest NI also offered support to 2 new inward investment projects in the Strangford area over the past 3 years. These 2 businesses, which are still trading, plan to invest £926,000 over the lifetime of their projects.

Attracting Jobs

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps her Department and its arms-length bodies have taken to attract jobs to each constituency in the each of the last six months; and at what cost to her Department.
(AQW 2388/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI is the agency through which the Department of Enterprise Trade & Investment provides funding to grow the private sector in Northern Ireland.

Invest NI's focus is to increase business productivity, the means by which wealth can be created for the benefit of the whole community. It does this by supporting projects that aim to create jobs, an aspect of the agency's work that is becoming increasingly important given the need to increase employment levels following the impact of the downturn, and those that promote innovation and capability development. Although not directly related to job creation, innovation and capability development activities are designed

to increase business competitiveness which generates growth, leading eventually to improved productivity and increased employment opportunities.

The table below shows how funding for these projects has been distributed across constituency areas in Northern Ireland during the first six months of the 2010-11 financial year. However, it should be noted that Invest NI does not allocate budgets by geographic areas such as Parliamentary Constituency Areas. Assistance patterns are demand-led by those businesses which have come forward with projects suitable for Invest NI assistance.

Also included in the table is the number of offers made indirectly by Invest NI through the Enterprise Development Programme (formerly the Start A Business programme). This scheme is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland, and provides advice and guidance to individuals wishing to start a new business. Initial analysis of the programme found that an average of 1.13 jobs were created by those businesses that continued to trade. Further analysis found that 68% of participants had proceeded to actually start a business, and 80% of those were still trading. Therefore, around 875 jobs would have been created during the period under this programme.

INVEST NI OFFER ACTIVITY BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA (APR – SEP 2010) – PROVISIONAL

Parliamentary Constituency Area	No. of Offers	New Jobs	Safe Jobs	Assistance Offered (£m)	Planned Investment (£m)	Enterprise Development Programme Offers
Belfast East	88	88	41	11.06	48	86
Belfast North	34	56	13	1.36	5.33	87
Belfast South	110	108	0	7.92	27.62	97
Belfast West	20	2	0	0.08	0.24	62
East Antrim	37	6	0	0.41	2.51	50
East Londonderry	49	16	2	1.63	4.41	95
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	72	134	0	1.96	14.16	108
Foyle	54	423	0	2.21	12.84	56
Lagan Valley	69	92	3	1.07	9.93	75
Mid Ulster	126	93	5	2.89	13.75	139
Newry And Armagh	88	133	4	1.67	9.27	77
North Antrim	55	22	1,212	5.58	36.1	53
North Down	31	16	5	0.3	1.62	58
South Antrim	83	640	7	8.66	60.19	64
South Down	76	53	0	0.65	3.78	89
Strangford	57	73	11	0.82	5.51	52
Upper Bann	76	52	0	5.46	16.87	72
West Tyrone	55	40	0	0.47	2.24	92
Not Yet Allocated	4	40	0	0.6	2.87	9

Parliamentary Constituency Area	No. of Offers	New Jobs	Safe Jobs	Assistance Offered (£m)	Planned Investment (£m)	Enterprise Development Programme Offers
Total	1,184	2,085	1,303	54.79	277.24	1,421

Notes:

- 1 Figures are provisional and may be subject to change.
- 2 These figures include both projects that are specifically aimed at job creation and projects that are not; therefore, job numbers do not directly correlate with the assistance and investment figures included in this table.
- 3 Some of the assistance offered may not be paid if projects are not fully delivered by the client.
- 4 Planned Investment includes Assistance Offered.
- 5 New Jobs represent the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
- 6 Safe Jobs represent the number jobs that would have been lost if the project was not supported.
- 7 Not Yet Allocated includes projects that have yet to find a location.

Promoting Exports

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department has taken to promote exports in each of the last 12 months.

(AQW 2389/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Under its Passport to Export suite of services, Invest NI helps Northern Ireland companies access world markets to win the export business which is so crucial to both their and the Northern Ireland economy's long-term growth.

The Invest NI support includes capability development, market visits, in-market support and special market and sectoral initiatives. Some of the support is available daily, for example, market research through the Business Information Centre, while others are focused on specific dates, for example, trade missions and exhibitions. In the last 12 months, Invest NI organised and provided financial assistance for companies to participate in 52 multi-sector missions, sectorally focused missions and international trade exhibitions. In the same period, Invest NI organised 30 export skills workshops.

Propel Ideas into Business Programme is a business support programme targeted at entrepreneurs with innovative, knowledge based ideas with export/global potential. The Programme aims to support and fast track early stage potential export/global start businesses and their entry into export markets. The Programme has proved to be very beneficial to participants in that it has taken many of them from business idea to commercialising their product/service and bring it to the export/global markets. It is anticipated 18 will complete the programme in 2010.

In addition to Trade Division activities, Invest NI's Business Improvement Services Division also supports development of export markets through its Northstar Mentoring and Interim manager programmes.

Northstar focuses on small/micro/start –up business and start-ups. Over 170 Marketing & Trade assignments have been supported over the last 12 months, many with a focus on exports to ROI.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the MATRIX panel has presented its report on the market opportunities of Project Kelvin; and if so, to detail its main recommendations.

(AQW 2408/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The MATRIX Telecoms report is now complete and I am pleased to advise that it will be formally launched within the next two weeks.

The report contains a detailed assessment of Northern Ireland's entire telecommunications infrastructure and has found that the advanced telecoms services will support unique world class business activity.

In brief, the report concludes that the combination of high bandwidth, low latency direct international connectivity, coupled with ubiquitous internal broadband access strongly positions Northern Ireland to exploit six key multi-billion dollar markets. These are:

- Advanced Engineering;
- Life & Health Sciences;
- Social and Digital Media;
- ICT;
- SmartGrids; and,
- Financial Services.

It is clear from the report that the investment by DETI in our Telecommunications infrastructure will now pay dividends for Northern Ireland as we work to exploit the six opportunities identified. However, it is essential that we act quickly and, once the report is published, officials from DETI and Invest NI will work together with industry and other stakeholders to take the MATRIX recommendations forward.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action (i) her Department; and (ii) Invest NI is taking to maximise the potential of Project Kelvin for the Derry City Council area. **(AQW 2410/11)**

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With Project Kelvin, businesses throughout Northern Ireland now have access to the same international telecoms services found in major cities such as Amsterdam and New York. Invest NI uses the benefits of our world class telecoms infrastructure to promote Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities.

In order to ensure that we exploit this infrastructure fully, I have asked the MATRIX Panel to conduct a study into market opportunities arising as a result of that infrastructure. The report will be available shortly.

I am aware that the benefits of the direct international link have heightened the interest of companies for the potential of locating a data centre in the North West. I myself met with the proposers of a cross border data centre, along with local representatives, to hear of their plans. Although at an early stage, I continue to monitor its progress with interest.

Invest NI, through its Collaborative Network Programme, supported a feasibility study into the potential commercial opportunities arising from Project Kelvin. This report was completed in November 2010 and is due for publication in the near future.

Led by the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce, Invest NI is an active participant in the Digital Activity Team recently set up in Londonderry to help grow the Digital sector in the city and maximise the competitive advantage of high speed connectivity brought about by Project Kelvin.

Officials from my Department and Invest NI have also offered advice to the North West Region Cross Border Group, led by Derry City Council, on a European funding application for a project targeted at utilising the potential of Project Kelvin to energise the growth of the "Smart Economy" in the North West Cross-border region. The project is designed to significantly enhance the region's capacity to create "Smart Economy" jobs.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the names of directors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society in and around November 2008.

(AQW 2412/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Statement of Administrator's Proposals dated 12 January 2009, which contains details of Presbyterian Mutual Society directors at the date of administration, is available for public scrutiny from the Registrar of Industrial and Provident Societies at Waterfront Plaza, Belfast and online: http://www.detini.gov.uk/deti-registry-index/credit_union-society_search.htm

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the dates of appointment of all former directors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society who were in office in and around November 2008.

(AQW 2415/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There is no statutory requirement for an industrial and provident society to provide the date of appointment of directors on their Annual Return. Accordingly, DETI does not hold information on the date of appointment of directors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society or any other industrial and provident society registered in Northern Ireland.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to name the former directors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society who (i) have; or (ii) have not had disqualification proceedings initiated against them since 2007.

(AQW 2416/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not the policy of the Department to disclose the names of persons against whom disqualification proceedings have been issued, or have not been issued.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the criteria used by her Department to determine whether or not to initiate disqualification proceedings against former directors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society since 2007.

(AQW 2417/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department considers whether it is expedient in the public interest to initiate disqualification proceedings. This involves consideration of a number of factors including the protection of the public, the nature of the allegations at issue, the directors responsibility in respect of such allegations together with any aggravating or mitigating factors and the prospect of success of proceedings should they issue.

The Department considers the nature of any matters of unfitness and their impact, not only to the date of insolvency but also the effect a disqualification order might have as a deterrent or in protection of the public.

The Department also takes into account any other relevant factors such as personal losses incurred, the period of trading, and the age and state of health of directors.

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much her Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2431/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There has been no expenditure on capital projects by DETI in the last three financial years.

Capital grant expenditure has not been considered in terms of this response.

Agenda NI

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much her Department and its agencies have spent on (i) articles and adverts in Agenda NI; (ii) subscriptions to Agenda NI; and (iii) payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences since May 2007.

(AQW 2433/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Information is provided for the period from May 2007 until 8 October 2010 as follows:

Articles and adverts in Agenda NI	Subscriptions to Agenda NI	Payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences
£79,012.32	£209.40	£65,670.79

Moratorium on Lignite

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the extension of the moratorium on lignite only applies to lignite mining proposals for the North Antrim constituency.

(AQW 2591/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The current moratorium on the granting of Mineral Prospecting Licences for lignite prospecting throughout Northern Ireland expired on 24th October 2010. I propose to extend that moratorium for a further three years until 24th October 2013.

Moratorium on Lignite

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the extension of the moratorium on lignite applies to lignite mining proposals for the South Antrim constituency.

(AQW 2643/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I would refer the Member to my Answer to his earlier Question AQW 2591/11 which indicated that the moratorium extends throughout Northern Ireland.

Rose Energy's Proposed Incinerator at Glenavy

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to Rose Energy's proposed incinerator at Glenavy, what consideration she has given to (i) the estimated £30 million required for construction; and (ii) the underwrite of loan guarantees of an additional £70 million capital required.

(AQW 2647/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI continues to evaluate this project and the due diligence process is at an advanced stage. The outcome of this will determine if and to what extent an offer of financial support will be made and also what conditions will be attached.

Irish Language Classes for Staff

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department currently offers, or plans to offer, Irish language classes to staff.

(AQW 2688/11)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department does not currently offer, nor has it any plans to offer, Irish language classes to staff.

Department of the Environment

Newtowncrommelin

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment why Planning Service has not designated Newtowncrommelin as a village, given that it is designated as a village by Ballymena Borough Council.
(AQW 2361/11)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): The Development Plan process is the main vehicle for assessing future land requirements and identifying the settlement hierarchy in a plan area under which new settlements such as Newtowncrommelin would be identified.

My Department, as part of the work for the draft Antrim, Ballymena and Larne Area Plan (ABLAP) 2016, was reviewing the settlement hierarchy of the Ballymena Borough. As you will be aware work on the ABLAP, together with the Armagh Area Plan and West Tyrone Area Plan, ceased during 2008 prior to any of these plans being published in draft form.

Any future consideration of the status of Newtowncrommelin may be reviewed and further consideration of the designation of new settlements can be taken forward through the preparation of Development Plans by Council when they assume planning powers.

Planning Applications

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of jobs, identified in planning applications, that have not been created because applications for business ventures have been delayed by the planning process for more than one year.
(AQW 2422/11)

Minister of the Environment: The reliability of estimates of the number of new jobs associated with specific planning applications varies with each application and in some cases is not available at all. Timescales to complete the processing of individual applications can also vary due to a variety of circumstances, sometimes out of the control of the planning system. Consequently the information requested could only be estimated on the basis of a manual check of case files. This would be disproportionate in terms of time and cost and would not produce reliable statistical data.

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how much his Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.
(AQW 2429/11)

Minister of the Environment: The table below provides total expenditure on capital projects by my Department in the Strangford constituency between 2007/08 and 2009/10.

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Expenditure on capital projects (Strangford constituency)	£349,131	£1,411	£76,305

New Developments

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment whether any new developments have been built on flood plains in each of the last five years, and what steps are being taken to protect these homes.
(AQW 2435/11)

Minister of the Environment: With regard to the number of developments built on flood plains in the last five years, my Department does not have the means by which to extract this information without undertaking a manual check of all planning application files. This is not only disproportionate in terms of time and cost, but would result in un-validated statistics being released.

My Department takes a precautionary approach to new development in flood plains, in line with PPS15, Planning and Flood Risk and where permission is granted developers are required to put suitable mitigation measures in place following a flood risk assessment.

It is the responsibility of the applicant to consider flood risk issues at a site. It is in their interests to do this as early as possible in the process. Depending on the risk, mitigation measures may be needed. The applicant will need to show how the development has been made safe through design and flood resilient construction and that it does not increase flood risk elsewhere.

Agenda NI

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how much his Department and its agencies have spent on (i) articles and adverts in Agenda NI; (ii) subscriptions to Agenda NI; and (iii) payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences since May 2007.

(AQW 2505/11)

Minister of the Environment: The table below provides the total spend for the period May 2007 to 30 November 2010 for each of the various costs requested.

	Articles & Adverts in Agenda NI (i)	Subscriptions to Agenda NI (ii)	Conference Costs (iii)
Total Spend	£8,885	£318	£53,510

Local Government

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what measures he intends to put in place to ensure that fairness and equality are central to the operation of Local Government; and (ii) how his Department intends to monitor delivery on this issue.

(AQW 2565/11)

Minister of the Environment: In my statement to the Assembly on 30 November I said that I want, through the proposed new governance arrangements, to ensure that councils pursue equality and fairness.

The key elements of these proposed new arrangements are first, a tightly defined list of methods for ensuring the sharing of power and responsibility between the political parties represented on a council. Second, the operation of checks and balances, in the form of a call-in procedure and the availability of qualified majority voting, to protect the interests of minorities.

These measures would be in addition to a council's statutory obligations in relation to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

To ensure the delivery of inclusive local democracy, to protect the rights of minorities, to prevent any direct or indirect discrimination, and to promote the need for equality of opportunity I propose that the new governance arrangements would be provided for in legislation.

Local Government Reform and Planning Reform Programmes

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has the capacity to meet the legislative timetable set out in his Ministerial Statement of 30 November 2010, on Local Government Reform and Planning Reform Programmes.

(AQW 2567/11)

Minister of the Environment: Yes, my Department has the capacity to meet the legislative timetable set out in my Ministerial Statement of 30 November 2010.

Irish Language Classes for Staff

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department currently offers, or plans to offer, Irish language classes to staff.

(AQW 2600/11)

Minister of the Environment: The Department does not currently offer, or have any plans to offer, Irish language classes to staff.

Artworks

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the value of the artworks that his Department currently has (i) on display; and (ii) in storage.

(AQW 2621/11)

Minister of the Environment: My Department currently has a number of artworks on display which as part of the NICS Art Collection are owned and managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) Properties Division. DFP has advised that information on these artworks should be excluded from departmental responses as it will be provided in their response.

Lignite Mining

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any discussions he, or his officials, have had with representatives of Antrim Coal, Peabody Coal or British Coal in relation to their proposed lignite mining activities in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2644/11)

Minister of the Environment: The Department received a planning application on 13 May 2010 from Antrim Coal Company for the extraction of lignite in the Ballyvollen townland of Antrim (Crumlin). The application is being processed by the Minerals Unit of Strategic Projects Directorate at Planning Service Headquarters.

A meeting between officials and the applicant's agent was held on 30 March 2010 to discuss the information required for the application.

Strategic Projects Unit

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of applications that the Strategic Projects Unit has determined since its inception; (ii) the number of these applications that were approved within the 6-month target timeframe; and (iii) the number of these applications that went through the pre-application discussion process, to the satisfaction of Strategic Projects Unit, prior to the submission of an application.

(AQW 2700/11)

Minister of the Environment: Since April 2008 the Strategic Projects teams have determined 78 Article 31 applications. In addition, since April 2009 the teams have also processed 36 other economically significant applications which, while not qualifying as Article 31, are nevertheless viewed as important to the NI Economy.

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 with an agreed outcome. To date, 8 applications have met the criteria to apply the PfG 6 month target all have been processed within 6 months.

Lignite Mining in South Antrim

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment why his Department has not required an Environmental Impact Assessment to be carried out by Antrim Coal in respect of a proposed open cast lignite mine in South Antrim.

(AQW 2711/11)

Minister of the Environment: As the development falls within category 2(a) of Schedule 2 of the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (NI) 1999 the Department is obliged under regulation 9 to make a determination as to whether the proposal would be EIA development and thereby require an Environmental Statement.

Taking into account advice from consultees, the scale of the development and the potential environmental impacts, the Department determined that the application did not require to be accompanied by an Environmental Statement.

Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of the Environment if he can confirm the status of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office from 1 April 2011.

(AQW 2729/11)

Minister of the Environment: From 1 April 2011, Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office will be part of the Southern Area Planning Office which will serve Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon, Newry & Mourne and Down Council areas. The main office will be in Craigavon with Downpatrick as a sub-office.

Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of administrative and planning staff employed at the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office; and (ii) the number of staff from this office who will be relocated to the Belfast and Craigavon Divisional Planning Offices from 1 April 2011.

(AQW 2761/11)

Minister of the Environment: The Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office currently has 21 administrative staff, this includes 3 staff due to move to other posts in early 2011. There are also a total of 43 specialist planning staff although this number is scheduled to reduce. I previously explained in my letter to you in September 2010, the background to the need to reduce staffing levels in the Planning Service.

In the light of my statement to the Assembly on 30 November 2010, about the need to restructure the Planning Service to better reflect the future make up of local councils, my officials have now commenced work on clarifying the detailed make up of the 5 new Area Planning Offices, post 1 April 2011. It is therefore not possible at this very early stage, to give precise details of how many staff will be required to move office location.

Where my proposals necessitate the relocation of management responsibility and processing of work this does not necessarily mean that all the staff currently carrying out that work will automatically move location also. The Department will work closely with the staff affected and the TUS to implement this change whilst continuing to deliver a high quality customer service and at the same time minimising the disruption for individual staff.

Disposal of Poultry Litter

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration his Department has given to inviting waste management companies from Europe to submit proposals to safely dispose of poultry litter, to safeguard value for money.

(AQW 2785/11)

Minister of the Environment: It is my Department's role to implement environmental legislation and is entirely a matter for the agricultural and private sectors to determine the means by which they choose to achieve compliance with that legislation.

However, as part of the development of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, my Department, along with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment established a working group with representatives of the poultry industry to investigate any viable interim options for the storage and use of poultry litter pending the establishment of a sustainable long-term technical solution.

The working group has actively pursued a range of options including alternative treatment systems available in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and further afield. The Departments and the industry are currently conducting a number of on-farm trials in relation to temporary storage measures prior to land spreading. However, land spreading of this material at current levels continues to be unsustainable 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.

I share your concern that the poultry industry should arrive at a value for money solution in determining the means by which it should achieve compliance with its legislative obligations, and am happy to reassure you that the business case for any solution which involves the commitment of public monies by my Department or any other Department will be subject to rigorous technical, economic and environmental assessment.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Service Overtime

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much has been spent on overtime payments for Civil Service staff in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2157/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The total amount paid by the eleven Northern Ireland Civil Service departments (and their agencies) to non-industrial and industrial staff in respect of overtime for the last five financial years is set out in the table below.

Financial Year	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Total Overtime Payments	£21,365,841	£21,075,985	£17,245,675	£15,656,381	£13,804,292

HR Connect

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much his Department has paid to HR Connect in each month of the last ten years.

(AQW 2262/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The amount paid to HR Connect in the last ten years is set out in the table attached.

Month / Year	Service Charge Payment
Oct-07	£48,142.00
Nov-07	£48,142.00
Dec-07	£672,035.00
Jan-08	£1,068,111.00

Month / Year	Service Charge Payment
Feb-08	£1,020,439.35
Mar-08	£1,130,109.00
Total	£3,986,978.35
Apr-08	£339,968.61
May-08	£395,847.00
Jun-08	£365,048.00
Jul-08	£355,133.58
Aug-08	£408,666.10
Sep-08	£420,374.41
Oct-08	£389,548.37
Nov-08	£456,136.26
Dec-08	£625,024.15
Jan-09	£434,241.63
Feb-09	£542,819.53
Mar-09	£490,010.00
Total	£5,222,817.64
Apr-09	£558,938.82
May-09	£582,501.57
Jun-09	£541,992.75
Jul-09	£686,491.06
Aug-09	£725,938.80
Sep-09	£875,853.40
Oct-09	£949,053.16
Nov-09	£943,923.49
Dec-09	£930,613.54
Jan-10	£944,483.08
Feb-10	£944,695.69
Mar-10	£884,371.49
Total	£9,568,856.85
Apr-10	£925,254.35
May-10	£913,785.58

Month / Year	Service Charge Payment
Jun-10	£916,905.64
Jul-10	£918,472.43
Aug-10	£892,426.36
Total	£4,566,844.36

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11; and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2289/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: To date DFP has facilitated 3 interns during 2010/11.

With regard to 2011/12, the Department is unable to confirm the number of interns that will be facilitated as each application will be considered on a case by case basis depending on the student's requirements and the Department's ability to accommodate these requirements.

Dublin Government's Current Financial Situation

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact on the local economy of the Dublin Government's current financial situation.

(AQW 2306/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Northern Ireland has strong economic links with the Republic of Ireland. They are our largest trading partner accounting for approximately 30% of our exports. Therefore a strong and growing Irish economy is very much in our interests. In that context I welcome the support package agreed with the EU and IMF on the 28th November 2010.

However, I am concerned about the potential impact on local Irish owned banks. We don't yet know the fine detail of how the EU – IMF Programme will be implemented, it is clear that a substantial downsizing and reorganisation of the Irish banking sector is required which is to be achieved by the run down of non core assets. This could lead to job losses in the Irish owned banks here – Bank of Ireland (UK) and First Trust - and impact on lending in Northern Ireland.

Finally, the austerity measures announced by the Irish Government will undoubtedly lead to falling demand in the Irish market. This could adversely affect our sales to the Republic and their ability to travel to Northern Ireland to shop.

Account NI and HR Connect

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the savings generated to date; and (ii) the future anticipated savings from the introduction of (a) Account NI; and (ii) HR Connect.

(AQW 2311/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The principal monetary benefit anticipated from the introduction of Account NI is savings accruing from the reduced requirement for finance staff in Departments and the shared service centre.

Departmental information is currently being collated but is not yet available. Shared service centre efficiencies have been offset as a consequence of early project slippage, unanticipated costs, the introduction of the 10 day prompt payment target and the extension of services to other organizations.

Account NI is currently carrying out a review of the business case to reflect changing circumstances and is unable to determine the extent of future shared service centre savings at this time.

The HRConnect business case stated that HRConnect would operate within a budget of £26,479,160 set at 05/06 prices. As the business case continues to operate within this available budget, as allocated to Departments, this represents efficiencies of £1,971,445 (7.44%).

We continue to seek to contain the cash running costs and operate within a budget of £26.4m, thereby generating an annual efficiency saving.

For both Account NI and HRConnect, Departments are responsible for ongoing savings in their own Department.

Economic Situation in the Republic of Ireland

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the economic impact on Northern Ireland of the current economic situation in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 2354/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Northern Ireland has strong economic links with the Republic of Ireland. They are our largest trading partner accounting for approximately 30% of our exports. Therefore a strong and growing Irish economy is very much in our interests. In that context I welcome the support package agreed with the EU and IMF on the 28th November 2010 in the hope that it will bring greater certainty and stability in the longer term.

However, I am concerned about the potential impact on local Irish owned banks. We don't yet know the fine detail of how the EU – IMF Programme will be implemented but it is clear a substantial downsizing and reorganisation of the Irish banking sector is required which is to be achieved by the run down of non core assets. This could lead to job losses in the Irish owned banks here – Bank of Ireland (UK) and First Trust - and impact on lending in Northern Ireland.

Finally, the austerity measures announced by the Irish Government will undoubtedly lead to falling demand in the Irish market. This could adversely affect our sales to the Republic and their ability to travel to Northern Ireland to shop.

National Asset Management Agency

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the impact of the National Asset Management Agency on Northern Ireland's finances.

(AQW 2355/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) is expected to acquire a total of €4 billion (£3.35 billion) of loans based in the Northern Ireland. This is a reduction on the first estimate of €5bn of loans but remains a significant sum that will have a major impact. At this stage, a confirmed €360m worth of loans based in Northern Ireland have already been transferred.

NAMA was designed to bring stability and confidence to the Republic of Ireland's Banking sector by removing their "toxic" debt and providing them with Government backed securities at an appropriately discounted rate. This provides them with much needed liquidity and assets acquired by NAMA are to be managed over the medium term.

The conditions attached to the International Financial Package for the Republic of Ireland includes that the work of NAMA will continue up until the end of March 2011 in terms of loan acquisition. I continue to expect therefore that the amount of loans acquired will be in the region of the €4 billion estimate. I had previously been assured that there would be no fire sale of the Northern Ireland Assets.

I don't yet know the fine detail of how the International Package will be implemented but is to include a fundamental downsizing and reorganisation of the Irish banking sector. This could lead to job losses in the Irish owned banks here and impact on lending in Northern Ireland. This is something we will need to monitor very closely.

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much his Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2394/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The spend on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years was as follows:

Year	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11 (to date)
Spend	£15,902	£280,592	£26,825	£0

Projects Part-funded by the Government of the Irish Republic

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list all the projects in each Department which are currently part-funded by the Government of the Irish Republic; and what the position is in respect of these projects in the light of the current financial situation in the Irish Republic.

(AQW 2397/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel is the accountable department for a number of elements of both the Interreg IVA and Peace III programmes.

Funding for these programmes comprises resources from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and match funding from national public expenditure provided by Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and, in the case of Interreg IVA, contributions from the Scottish government in respect of the participation of regions of western Scotland. All ERDF monies for the programmes are provided by the EU and represent the larger funding element in both Peace III and Interreg IVA.

Tables showing the approved projects in respect of these programmes as at 26 November 2010 are attached.

The Republic of Ireland government remains committed to the aims and objectives of both programmes and to providing the relevant national match funding element.

Data in relation to projects undertaken by other departments would need to be obtained directly from those departments.

TABLE 1: INTERREG IVA PRIORITY 2, THEME 1 – PUBLIC SECTOR COLLABORATION

Applicant Name	Project Name
Centre for Cross Border Studies	Ireland/Northern Ireland Cross Border Co-operation Observatory
CMAL Scotland	Small Ferries Strategic Plan
COMET	Administration Costs
East Border Region	Administration Costs
ICBAN	Administration Costs
North East Partnership	Administration Costs
North West Region Cross Border Group	Administration Costs
North East Partnership	Business Improvement Project
COMET	Bio Recorders Network
Donegal County Council	Women Into Public Life

Applicant Name	Project Name
DHSSPS	Driving Change
RNIB	Sensory Engagement Project
East Border Region	Energy Efficiency and Micro Generation
ICBAN	Central Border Regional Spatial Planning Initiative
Cedar Foundation	ConneXions
East Border Region	Promoting Balanced and Sustainable Cross Border Development
North West Region Cross Border Group	Urban and Village Renewal
North West Region Cross Border Group	SPACEial
EGSA	Deaf Communications Infrastructure Development Project
East Border Region	Environmental Action for Diversity

TABLE 2 - INTERREG IVA – PRIORITY 3 – TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Applicant Name	Project Name
SEUPB	Technical Assistance
East Border Region	AEBR Conference

TABLE 3 - PEACE III – PRIORITY 3 – TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Applicant Name	Project Name
SEUPB	Technical Assistance
BA/CRC	Technical Assistance Priority1 Themes 1 and 2

Unpaid Domestic Rates

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of unpaid domestic rates in each district council area in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2398/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The domestic rates unpaid for Northern Ireland by district council area at 28 November 2010, split by year of assessment for the last three years, are detailed in the attached table.

These figures are not the domestic rates that were outstanding at the end of each financial year. It is therefore not correct to use the figures to state that domestic ratepayer debt doubled between 2008-09 and 2009-10. The figures rather show the age of unpaid rates at 28 November 2010.

Land & Property Services continues to pursue all unpaid rates, whilst recognising the genuine financial difficulties of many ratepayers. The Agency seeks to agree payment arrangements with ratepayers where possible.

LPS had reduced the £157 million total prior year ratepayer debt to £93 million at 28 November 2010.

District Council	Year of Assessment		
	2007	2008	2009
Antrim	£96,225	£272,792	£454,072
Ards	£247,237	£415,017	£709,004
Armagh	£213,138	£398,162	£763,688
Ballymena	£55,877	£124,974	£389,006
Ballymoney	£65,745	£91,788	£230,590
Banbridge	£146,903	£260,214	£437,176
Belfast	£1,562,082	£2,495,677	£4,417,636
Carrickfergus	£132,485	£230,435	£418,434
Castlereagh	£136,580	£247,617	£412,211
Coleraine	£123,381	£257,156	£582,272
Cookstown	£60,165	£106,795	£232,433
Craigavon	£292,421	£459,781	£1,139,536
Derry	£323,444	£566,004	£1,145,820
Down	£218,110	£385,004	£767,683
Dungannon & S.Tyrone	£99,892	£204,916	£490,959
Fermanagh	£107,432	£176,391	£355,190
Larne	£50,163	£104,484	£181,874
Limavady	£61,496	£136,086	£299,176
Lisburn	£353,809	£632,088	£1,078,231
Magherafelt	£61,283	£107,114	£258,501
Moyle	£40,539	£71,572	£136,105
Newry & Mourne	£339,586	£548,861	£1,180,921
Newtownabbey	£209,808	£386,611	£671,993
North Down	£229,774	£427,221	£711,486
Omagh	£74,523	£155,058	£338,378
Strabane	£90,497	£163,588	£318,998
Grand Total	£5,392,595	£9,425,406	£18,121,374

The figures may not total exactly due to rounding.

Agenda NI

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much his Department and its agencies have spent on (i) articles and adverts in Agenda NI; (ii) subscriptions to Agenda NI; and (iii) payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences since May 2007.

(AQW 2473/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The amount paid to BMF Business Services by my Department since May 2007, in respect of the services detailed, is £28,273.

	Articles and adverts in Agenda NI	Subscriptions to Agenda NI	Payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences	Total
£	11,400	653	16,220	28,273

Lone Pensioner Allowance

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many pensioners in the (i) Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) Strangford constituency have benefitted from the Lone Pensioner Allowance since its introduction; and how much they have saved on their rates bills.

(AQW 2496/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below shows the total Lone Pensioner Allowance awards made by Land & Property Services for owner occupiers in the Ards Borough Council area, along with their total value (as at 5 December 2010):

Council	Total awards 01 April 08 to date	Total value £
Ards Borough	1,237	£538,052

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive administers Lone Pensioner Allowance for the social and private rented sectors. The Executive has supplied the following information on total current awards of Lone Pensioner Allowance by its relevant office (as at 30 November 2010):

NIHE Office	Total current awards
Newtownards	209

Land & Property Services records show the total amount awarded by NIHE during the period for the Ards Borough Council area (as at 5 December 2010):

Council	Total value of awards 01 April 08 to date
Ards Borough	£63,512

Information is not available for Strangford constituency as Land & Property Services records Lone Pensioner Allowance information by local government district and not parliamentary constituency.

Presbyterian Mutual Access Fund

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive contributions of £25m each to the Presbyterian Mutual Access Fund are to be treated as assistance rather than loans to be repaid or recouped from assets of the PMS.

(AQW 2611/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The exact details of the proposed Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) solution have not yet been finalised and any final solution will be subject to the agreement of the Executive, the Assembly, the EU, and PMS creditors and members.

However the proposed solution includes making a loan of £175m to the Administrator over a period of approximately ten years and provision for a Mutual Access Fund to which the Government will

contribute £25 million, the Northern Ireland Executive will contribute £25 million and where the Church will also make a contribution.

Over time our hope is that the PMS assets will recover sufficiently for the Access Fund to be repaid and to allow everyone to recover their money in full. However this cannot be guaranteed. After repaying the £175m loan any surplus at the end of the ten year loan workout period would firstly be used to repay the cost of the Access Fund. After this any remaining surplus would be available for distribution to PMS creditors and members.

Artworks

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the value of the artworks that his Department currently has (i) on display; and (ii) in storage.

(AQW 2658/11)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Approximately £1.8 million worth of art is currently on display with a further £0.1 million available for display.

My Department currently has no artworks in storage.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Child Cystic Fibrosis Patients

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether child Cystic Fibrosis patients, treated at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children during refurbishment works at Allen Ward and Cherrytree House, will be accommodated in single rooms and have access to their own washing facilities to minimise the risk of cross-infection.

(AQW 2272/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The planned refurbishment of Allen Ward and Cherry Tree House will greatly improve inpatient accommodation, both for patients and their families.

While the details of the refurbishment work are currently being determined, the Belfast Trust has confirmed that when the refurbishment work is commenced, all cystic fibrosis patients will be nursed individually in their own rooms, as is the case now.

During the period of refurbishment, patients may be required to share bathroom facilities, as is currently the position. Appropriate measures will continue be taken to ensure that the risk of cross-infection is kept to a minimum and that patients' care is not compromised in any way.

Staff Salaries

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what was the total cost of salaries incurred by his Department in the 2009/10 financial year for all staff within (i) his Department; (ii) the Regional Health and Social Care Board; (iii) each Health and Social Care Trust; and (iv) any other arms-length bodies.

(AQW 2279/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total salary costs for DHSSPS bodies (i.e. Department, HSC Board, HSC Trusts and special agencies) are contained within each bodies 2009-10 published annual accounts.

Arm's-length Bodies: Funding

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all the arms-length bodies that currently receive funding from his Department.

(AQW 2280/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following organisations receive funding from DHSSPS either directly or indirectly via the Health and Social Care Board and/or the Public Health Agency:

Organisation	Type of Organisation
Belfast HSC Trust	HSC Body
Northern HSC Trust	HSC Body
South Eastern HSC Trust	HSC Body
Southern HSC Trust	HSC Body
Western HSC Trust	HSC Body
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service	HSC Body
Patient & Client Council	HSC Body
Business Service Organisation	HSC Body
Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service	HSC Special Agency
Public Health Agency	HSC Body
HSC Board	HSC Body
NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency	HSC Special Agency
NI Social Care Council	NDPB*
NI Fire and Rescue Service	NDPB*
NI Medical and Dental Training Agency	HSC Special Agency
NI Practice & Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery	NDPB*
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority	NDPB*

*NDPB – Non Departmental Public Body

Staff Salaries

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1850/11, to detail where those staff earning (i) between £50,000 and £100,000 per annum; and (ii) in excess of £100,000 per annum are based within his Department and its associated arm's length bodies, including each Health and Social Care Trust and the Health and Social Care Board.

(AQW 2281/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In my Department all those staff earning £50,000 or over are based in Castle Buildings, Stormont Estate, Belfast. The information in relation to arm's length bodies is not held centrally and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11; and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2288/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To date, my Department has facilitated 3 interns during 2010/2011.

Regarding 2011/12, my Department will consider applications on a case-by-case basis depending on the area of work requested by any applicants and the Department's ability to accommodate these.

Redevelopment of Whiteabbey Hospital and the Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the redevelopment of Whiteabbey Hospital and the Mid-Ulster Hospital, including the expenditure to date and the projected timescales for progress.

(AQW 2298/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As you will be aware, deliberations on the budget for the next four years are ongoing. Until the budget for my Department becomes clear, it is not possible to determine the timing for any projects, including any proposals to redevelop Whiteabbey and Mid-Ulster Hospitals.

In the meantime, both these hospitals will continue to play a key role in providing services to the local community.

Capital Projects and Large-scale Maintenance Projects

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans for (i) capital projects: and (ii) large-scale maintenance projects over the next three years.

(AQW 2299/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Final decisions on the capital projects and the planned maintenance programme which will proceed during the next budget period can only be made once I have full clarity on the level of funding, both revenue and capital, being made available to my Department in order to build and operate schemes.

Residential Centre for Substance Abuse

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he intends to establish a residential substance misuse treatment centre for young people under the age of 18 who are suffering from addiction.

(AQW 2303/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Preventing and addressing the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse is a key issue for my Department, and I am becoming increasingly aware of the issues in relation to addressing with the more complex treatment and support needs of under 18s.

Where possible, a young person's substance misuse problems are managed through locally available community-based services – to this end there are a range of counselling and mentoring services for children and young people available right across Northern Ireland. There is currently no dedicated drug and alcohol Tier 4 in-patients service for under 18s, but there are generic CAMHS beds available, and residential facilities are made available for individuals when there is a clinical need for such treatment.

Young people with significant substance misuse problems tend to have multiple issues of concern and are often in contact with a range of services including criminal justice, social services and mental health services. For those young people an interagency approach is essential and in line with good

practice, specialist substance misuse services work with these services to ensure that there is a proper care pathway in place for these young people.

I have tasked the HSC Board and the Public Health Agency to develop a commissioning framework for addiction services across NI, and the services for those aged under 18 should be a key part of this discussion.

Staff Travel Claims

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of travel claims for (i) the Regional Health and Social Care Board; (ii) each Health and Social Care Trust; and (iii) the Northern Ireland Ambulance Trust, in the last available financial year.

(AQW 2312/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of travel claims for the HSC Board and the six Trusts is set out in the table below. The purpose of these costs is to reimburse staff for expenses incurred as a result of duties relating to their job and will include mileage allowances, public transport costs, subsistence and car parking. This includes the travel costs for those staff delivering health and social care to people in their own homes and local communities.

HSC Trust	2009/10 £m
HSC Board	0.6
Belfast HSC Trust	6.4
Northern HSC Trust	10.3
South Eastern HSC Trust	6.1
Western HSC Trust	7.9
Southern HSC Trust	9.0
NI Ambulance Service	0.4

The HSC Board and the Trusts are endeavouring to keep travel and subsistence costs to an absolute minimum through, for example, the use of tele/video conferencing and internal facilities for meetings, workshops and conferences.

Antrim Area Hospital Accident and Emergency Unit

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's position on the proposed extension of the Accident and Emergency Unit at Antrim Area Hospital.

(AQW 2315/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Trust has submitted a business case outlining proposals to develop a new A&E Department at Antrim Area Hospital. These proposals are currently being assessed and a decision on the outcome of the business case is expected by the end of December 2010.

As you will be aware, deliberations on the budget for the next four years are ongoing. Until the budget for my Department becomes clear, it is not possible to determine the timing for the progression of any projects, including the extension of the A&E Unit at Antrim Hospital. However, I can assure you that this project remains one of my top priorities.

Staff Salaries

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was spent in total within his Department and its arms-length bodies on staff salaries in the 2009/10 financial year.
(AQW 2322/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total spent on staff salaries for my Department and its arms length bodies in the 2009/10 financial year was £2.15bn. This includes salaries and wages, social security and other pension costs.

Waiting Time for Occupational Therapists

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1655/11, to provide the number of patients in the Western and Southern Health and Social Care Trusts awaiting assessment by an Occupational Therapist in whichever format is available.
(AQW 2335/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At 12 November 2010, there were

- 686 patients waiting from referral for treatment by an Occupational Therapist in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.
- 743 patients waiting from referral for treatment by an Occupational Therapist in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

Capital Projects

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.
(AQW 2351/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following capital investment in a range of health schemes has been made within the Strangford constituency over the last 3 years:

2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
£100,000	£467,000	£1,213,000

Crisis Homes for People Suffering from Mental Health Problems

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of crisis homes for people suffering from mental health problems; and their locations.
(AQW 2359/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently six crisis homes for people suffering from mental health problems. These are located in the following areas:

- Belfast
- Bangor
- Londonderry
- Enniskillen
- Omagh

It would not be appropriate to give specific details about locations for reasons of patient confidentiality.

Health Service Electronic and Manual Processes

Mr R Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether he will integrate Health Service electronic and manual processes into a single system that would allow GPs, when making a referral, to indicate a patient's mobility and communication needs; and if so, when this system will be in place; (ii) when he will introduce a system for all correspondence to be supplied to patients in their preferred format; and (iii) when all the information available to patients, such as medical records, will be available in their preferred format.

(AQW 2363/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Most GP practices use a standard referral template when referring a patient to secondary care. This template includes provision for the referrer to indicate any special needs including communication or mobility needs. The NI Clinical Communications Gateway project has been initiated to facilitate the electronic transmission of GP referrals to secondary care using this template.

In addition, through collaborative working on the preparation of a new Section 75 Action Plan, HSC Trusts will ensure that patients receive information in their preferred format. Furthermore, HSC Trusts can already provide documents on request in a range of accessible formats.

Staff Expenses

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1288/11, to detail the current (i) mileage rate; and (ii) allowance for meals payable by the Health and Social Care Trusts to staff as expenses.

(AQW 2368/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The purpose of travel and subsistence allowances is to reimburse staff for expenses incurred as a result of duties relation to their job. There are a number of mileage rates and allowances available to HSC staff depending on personal circumstances; details are available in Section 17 of the NHS Terms and Conditions of Service Handbook. This is available at <http://www.nhsemployers.org/Pages/home.aspx>

Private Healthcare Companies

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether private healthcare companies who take referrals from the Health Service are subject to health service procedures on communication with patients and waiting time targets.

(AQW 2369/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Board has advised me that independent sector companies which take referrals from the Health Service are subject to the standard health service elective access protocols which cover communication with patients and waiting time targets.

This obligation is included in the terms and conditions of standard contracts.

Funding Provided to Derg Valley Care Ltd, Castlederg

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to detail the funding provided by his Department to Derg Valley Care Ltd, Castlederg in each of the last five years; and (ii) whether any conditions were attached to the funding; and if so, to outline these conditions.

(AQW 2371/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The level of grant funding provided by my Department to Derg Valley Care Ltd, Castlederg in the last 5 years is as follows:

2010/11	2009/10	2008/09	2007/08	2006/07
£14,390 *	£15,725	£10,790	£ 8,430	£0

* As the 2010/11 financial year is not yet complete, further payments may be made to Derg Valley Care Ltd before 31 March 2011.

A number of conditions have been attached to the grant funding. These are:

- a) An interim report, which details progress across all activity outlined in Derg Valley Care Ltd training plan is to be submitted to DHSSPS no later than 8 Oct 2010. This must include the names of candidates against each NVQ, the level and title of each NVQ and the dates of registration with an approved Assessment Centre.
- b) All expenditure on all activities must be accounted for in case of a possible inspection.
- c) Evidence of spend and activity should be provided eg proof of candidate registrations, receipts and portfolios available for inspection.
- d) In order to comply with audit requirements, DHSSPS Office of Social Services staff may visit Derg Valley Care Ltd
- e) DHSSPS may review funding at the Interim Report stage if candidates names and registration details are not submitted.
- f) Derg Valley Care Ltd is financially viable
- g) Derg Valley Care Ltd has adequate procedures for support of equal opportunities
- h) Derg Valley Care Ltd has in place all relevant policies to ensure good practice in child protection, protection of vulnerable adults, health & safety.
- i) Derg Valley Care Ltd has in place adequate systems to manage support training activity funded by DHSSPS's Office of Social Services; and
- j) The grant provided will not be used for any political activity.

South Tyrone Hospital, Dungannon

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his future plans for the South Tyrone Hospital, Dungannon; and whether he proposes to make any changes to the existing arrangements and current staffing levels.

(AQW 2373/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The delivery of services and operational aspects of Trust delivery plans at the South Tyrone Hospital, Dungannon is a matter for the Southern Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust as the service provider.

Tyrone County Hospital will continue to provide a range of services that, in conjunction with primary care, will help provide the local population with the majority of health services they require.

The Trust has advised that there are plans to provide additional urology and ophthalmology services at South Tyrone.

Recent capital investment in South Tyrone Hospital has included a £1million refurbishment of wards and a new day hospital.

Funding for Quangos

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all the Quangos currently funded, or part-funded, by his Department; and how much funding each has received in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2375/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A list of the Quangos (Non Departmental Public Bodies and Agencies sponsored by or associated with my Department) currently funded, or part-funded, by my Department in each of the last three years is shown below:

Directly Funded by the DHSSPS	2007/08 £m	2008/09 £m	2009/10 £m
HSC Board	N/A	N/A	3,745
Business Service Organisation	N/A	N/A	40
Public Health Agency	N/A	N/A	68
Patient Client Council	N/A	N/A	2
NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency	3	3	4
NI Social Care Council	3	3	3
NI Fire and Rescue Service	73	82	83
NI Medical and Dental Training Agency	45	46	52
NI Practice & Education Council for Nursing & Midwifery	1	1	1
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority	5	6	6

Indirectly Funded via the Health & Social Care Board, Public Health Agency or Trusts	2007/08 £m	2008/09 £m	2009/10 £m
Business Service Organisation	N/A	N/A	72
Belfast HSC Trust	927	1,084	1,222
Northern HSC Trust	450	525	577
South Eastern HSC Trust	395	454	502
Southern HSC Trust	380	458	510
Western HSC Trust	385	458	513
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service	45	56	58
Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service	21	26	26

Four new organisations that are currently funded, came into existence from 1 April 2009. These are the Patient Client Council, the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the Business Services Organisation. The Central Services Agency, the Health Promotion Agency, the Medical Physics

Agency, and the former Health & Social Services Boards all ceased to exist on 31 March 2009 and therefore their funding is not reported above.

The Public Health Agency was created through a merger of various parts of the former HSSBs, the former Health Promotion Agency (NI) and parts of the former Central Services Agency.

The Health Estates Agency ceased to exist as an entity in its own right on 31 March 2009 and was brought under the umbrella of the DHSSPS.

As a result of the Review of Public Administration my Department has reduced the number of Health and Social Care Trusts from nineteen to six, the number of Health and Social Service Councils from four to one and the Number of Boards from four to one. Put simply, prior to RPA there would have been nineteen more bodies in the list than are listed above. So I have halved the "Quangos".

Clostridium Difficile

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1795/11, (i) how many Departmental staff are involved in the public inquiry into the C difficile outbreak in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) the grades of these staff; (iii) the hourly rates charged by the members of the inquiry panel; (iv) whether panel members or their employers receive payment for their involvement; and (v) what is the estimated total cost of the inquiry.

(AQW 2399/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: One member of staff from DHSSPS has been seconded to the Inquiry Office. The DHSSPS staff member is an Administrative Officer. The Inquiry panel members are paid an hourly rate between £175 and £200. The hourly rates have been determined by the Department in line with other similar inquiries. Panel members receive payment directly for hours worked on receipt of an itemised invoice. No payment is made to any other employer that any of them may have. The estimated cost of the Inquiry has been detailed in AQW 1194/11 and AQW 1795/11.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1797/11, (i) to detail the contents of the Serious Adverse Incident (SAI) report sent by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to his Department on 15 October 2007; (ii) when the SAI report regarding the emergence of C difficile Ribotype 027 was received by his Department; (iii) what recommendation it made; (iv) what action was taken in response to the emergence of this new and virulent strain of C difficile; and (v) when this action was taken.

(AQW 2400/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The contents of the SAI report which was received by DHSSPS on 15 October 2007 are set out in the RQIA report of the independent review of the outbreak of Clostridium difficile in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, at paragraph 6.2.16.

The RQIA report also sets out, at paragraph 6.2.16, the key elements of the control plan which the Trust drew up to contain the problem and prevent further cases.

The timeframe for the actions in the control plan ranged from immediate effect to February 2008.

The RQIA report is available at: www.rqia.org.uk/publications/rqia_review_reports.cfm

Attempted Suicide

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have attempted suicide in each Health and Social Care Trust area in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2405/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Child Cystic Fibrosis Patients

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many dedicated hospital beds he intends to provide for children with cystic fibrosis.

(AQW 2409/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for the Health and Social Care Board, as the commissioner of services, to prioritise and allocate services to meet the needs of the population of Northern Ireland.

Specialist services for children suffering from cystic fibrosis are currently provided on a regional basis from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC), where they can access a full range of services appropriate to their needs, including physiotherapy, dietetics, social work and clinical psychology. Community care is also managed by the regional team, and is provided across Northern Ireland by a social worker and a community nurse specialist.

Although there are no dedicated beds for children suffering from cystic fibrosis, patients who require inpatient treatment are normally admitted to Cherry Tree House or Allen Ward in RBHSC, although children with a specific requirement for isolation or surgical intervention may be admitted to the infectious diseases unit or surgical ward within the hospital.

Cherry Tree House and Allen Ward are currently undergoing refurbishment work to reconfigure current accommodation to offer more side wards, better parent accommodation and improved staff areas. Consultation on the refurbishment is currently ongoing.

Child Cystic Fibrosis Patients

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current level of specialist provision for children with cystic fibrosis.

(AQW 2411/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for the Health and Social Care Board, as the commissioner of services, to prioritise and allocate services to meet the needs of the population of Northern Ireland.

Specialist services for children suffering from cystic fibrosis are currently provided on a regional basis from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC), where they can access a full range of services appropriate to their needs, including physiotherapy, dietetics, social work and clinical psychology. Community care is also managed by the regional team, and is provided across Northern Ireland by a social worker and a community nurse specialist.

Although there are no dedicated beds for children suffering from cystic fibrosis, patients who require inpatient treatment are normally admitted to Cherry Tree House or Allen Ward in RBHSC, although children with a specific requirement for isolation or surgical intervention may be admitted to the infectious diseases unit or surgical ward within the hospital.

Cherry Tree House and Allen Ward are currently undergoing refurbishment work to reconfigure current accommodation to offer more side wards, better parent accommodation and improved staff areas. Consultation on the refurbishment is currently ongoing.

Cherrytree House of the Royal Victoria Hospital for Sick Children

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his future plans for Cherrytree House in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children.

(AQW 2413/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for the Health and Social Care Board, as the commissioner of services, to prioritise and allocate services to meet the needs of the population of Northern Ireland.

Specialist services for children suffering from cystic fibrosis are currently provided on a regional basis from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC), where they can access a full range of services appropriate to their needs, including physiotherapy, dietetics, social work and clinical psychology. Community care is also managed by the regional team, and is provided across Northern Ireland by a social worker and a community nurse specialist.

Although there are no dedicated beds for children suffering from cystic fibrosis, patients who require inpatient treatment are normally admitted to Cherry Tree House or Allen Ward in RBHSC, although children with a specific requirement for isolation or surgical intervention may be admitted to the infectious diseases unit or surgical ward within the hospital.

Cherry Tree House and Allen Ward are currently undergoing refurbishment work to reconfigure current accommodation to offer more side wards, better parent accommodation and improved staff areas. Consultation on the refurbishment is currently ongoing.

Nursery and Day Care Provision

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) why the Southern Health and Social Care Trust is implementing retrospectively revised criteria which increases the space per child ratio in the provision of nursery or day care places; and whether this is a departmental directive or are Trusts allowed flexibility in implementation.

(AQW 2437/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is not currently implementing retrospective revised criteria which increases the space per child ratio in the provision of nursery or day care places and my Department has not given a directive to do so.

Cancer Patients

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether all newly diagnosed cancer patients have access to a clinical nurse specialist; and which patients in each Health and Social Care Trust have access to a clinical nurse specialist.

(AQW 2442/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The numbers of newly diagnosed cancer patients having access to a clinical nurse specialist are not available.

The number and distribution of clinical nurse specialists will vary in line with the number of people suffering from different forms of cancer and whether or not their cancer is treated in the local cancer units or at the Cancer Centre.

Since 2007 there has been a net increase of 9.5 clinical nurse specialists in post to give a total of 52.87. The HSC Board and Trusts are currently evaluating existing service provision with the aim of ensuring that all newly diagnosed cancer patients can have access to a cancer clinical nurse specialists.

Card Before You Leave Appointment System

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) which Health and Social Care Trusts are currently operating the Card Before You Leave programme; (ii) to explain the purpose of this programme; (iii) how much money has been allocated to each Trust to fund the programme; and (d) how patients are identified as suitable for the programme.

(AQW 2443/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Card Before You Leave protocol is in operation in each Trust area.

The programme was launched in January 2010 in order to ensure that patients at risk of self-harm or suicide receive ongoing care in the community following their discharge from A&E or an acute inpatient setting.

The programme is funded from existing budgets, no additional funding has been provided.

Those patients presenting at A&E, who are assessed to be at low-risk of self-harm or suicide, are given a card detailing useful contact numbers. Within adult Mental Health Services, this card will also have a fixed-time appointment for a follow-up assessment in four Trust areas; the Southern Trust intend to introduce such appointments within the next few weeks. The same system operates within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in all Trust areas with the exception of the Northern Trust. The HSC Board confirm that discussions are currently ongoing with NHSCT to implement this system.

Patients are identified using existing psycho-social assessment tools.

Card Before You Leave Appointment System

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been given an appointment card before leaving a healthcare facility in each Health and Social Care Trust since the Card Before You Leave scheme was launched.

(AQW 2444/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Card Before You Leave Appointment System

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, since the launch of the Card Before You Leave scheme, how many patients (i) have not been given an appointment card before leaving a healthcare facility; (ii) were given an appointment in a follow up telephone call; and (iii) attended an appointment made in a follow up telephone call, in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2445/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

PSNI Intervention

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times, in each of the last five years, each Health and Social Care Trust has asked the PSNI to intervene with, or speak to, a patient who has discharged themselves from hospital without completing medical treatment or against medical advice.

(AQW 2446/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available on the number of times, in each of the last five years, each Health and Social Care Trust has asked the PSNI to intervene with, or speak to, a patient who has discharged themselves from hospital without completing medical treatment or against medical advice and could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

Home-Start Funding

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he intends to continue funding for HomeStart Schemes in the 2011/12 financial year and beyond; and if he will make a statement on this issue.

(AQW 2662/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: You will understand that, with Budget discussions ongoing, I am unable to guarantee any new funding beyond March 2011.

My Department has a particular focus on Families Matter, the family and parenting strategy. Through that strategy, I am investing £2.5 million a year, on a recurrent basis, to support families through a range of family support initiatives.

My officials are currently engaged with the Health and Social Care Board to ensure that this funding is used to support early intervention services for hard-to-reach families and provide, not only practical assistance, but also help in building their parenting resilience and skill. As existing providers, I would think that Home Start schemes would be well positioned to enter into dialogue with their local Health and Social Care Trusts about how they might further contribute to delivering on this agenda, and I would urge them to do so.

Limavady Fire Station

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new fire station in Limavady, for which funding was ring-fenced.

(AQW 2692/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This project was identified as one of a number of capital priorities by NIFRS in its Strategic Development Plan. However, no funding has been ring-fenced as we move into the new Budget period 2011/12- 2014/15. Once I am allocated a budget for these years, I will be in a position to prioritise within that budget.

I continue to remain committed to providing first class fire fighting facilities

NHS: Training

Mrs C McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to ensure that there is value for money when Health Service personnel attend training courses.

(AQO 676/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Departmental spend on education and training for 2010/11 is around £160m. Value for money is achieved through a range of governance, accountability and commissioning mechanisms the department has in place with education providers and other partners. These include Service Level Agreements, senior management accountability meetings, inspections and audits, participant feedback and benchmarking costs with other parts of the UK. These mechanisms evaluate courses for effectiveness and relevance to strategic and service objectives with patient's need and safety at the heart of decision making.

If we wish to deliver a service that is safe, innovative and modern then staff must be equipped with the necessary skills.

Causeway Hospital: Appointments

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have failed to turn up for appointments at the Causeway Hospital over the last six months.

(AQO 683/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on missed hospital appointments is collected by my Department on a quarterly basis. The number of missed hospital appointments over the six month period 1st April 2010 – 30th September 2010, the most recent quarters for which official information is available showed there were 2,783 occasions when patients failed to turn up for appointments at the Causeway Hospital.

Hospital-acquired Infections: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on hospital acquired infections in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQO 685/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Validated surveillance figures for the Northern Trust show that in the quarter ending 30 September 2010 there were 28 cases of C. difficile in inpatients aged 65 years and over, compared to 29 cases during the same period last year. There were 6 cases of MRSA, compared to 4 cases during the same period last year. During the first half of the reporting year there was a small rise in case numbers compared with the first two quarters of 2009/10 but there have been significant improvements on the 2007 and 2008 figures.

The Public Health Agency is working with the Trust to further reduce infections, and I am very pleased to note the excellent scores that the Trust has achieved in the RQIA unannounced hygiene inspections. It is clear that these inspections have prompted significant improvements in hospital hygiene across Northern Ireland.

Western Health and Social Care Trust: Care Packages

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that efficient care packages are available to meet the needs of people in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQO 686/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am continuing to develop and expand the range of domiciliary care services available and increase the number of people who manage their own care through Direct Payments. I have also introduced Regional Access Criteria for Domiciliary Care in 2008 to provide for greater transparency and harmonisation in the process of identifying and prioritising need. In the present budget period I have committed an extra £58m from April 2008 to March 2011 in order to help support an additional 1500 people in the community.

In spite of this investment, staff in the Western Trust are finding it extremely difficult to meet the rising demand for domiciliary care, not least because they remain unable to plan on the basis of their next year's budget.

I have sought to highlight these circumstances in order to make the best possible case for increased resources, and to advise the Executive, the DFP and this Assembly of the increasing urgency of the need for resources to provide this lifeline for some of the most frail and vulnerable people in our community.

Mental Health

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to the recent Position Statement from the Royal College of Psychiatrists 'No Health without Public Mental Health: The Case for Action'.

(AQO 687/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I support the policy proposals put forward in the Royal College statement, most of which are already being addressed by the Health and Social Care sector through implementation of a range of public health and mental health services strategies and programmes. This broad programme of work includes actions to: reduce health inequalities; reduce alcohol-related harm, improve population mental health and wellbeing; reduce suicide and self harm; reduce smoking prevalence; and improve access to psychological therapies.

Training

Mr M Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether all staff within the Health Service have the option of taking accredited courses.

(AQO 688/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Each year the department invests over £160m in developing and maintaining the skills of the workforce. Over 50% of HSC staff hold a professional qualification – nurses, doctors, dentists, AHP's and social workers, accordingly, not only is accreditation an option it is an essential requirement, laid down by regulatory bodies such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council and General Medical Council.

The department works closely with lead bodies in establishing and upholding standards for professional competence, education and development at all stages of individuals careers. Other HSC staff are provided with opportunities for training and education through their employers using both accredited and non accredited means, linked to the performance appraisal system.

The very broad range of posts in the health service requires a comprehensive menu of personal development solutions to meet the changing and diverse demands that in turn lead to better services for patients and clients.

Budget: DHSSPS

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on his Department's budgetary position.

(AQO 689/11)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The outcome of the UK Spending Review and its impact at Block level means that difficult decisions will have to be made. However, the Block has benefited from the protection afforded to Health in England and that provides an opportunity for the Executive to do similar here. I will not, however, be in a position to outline the funding for my Department until the Executive agrees the Budget allocations for my Department. But what I can say is that by the end of this Budget 2010 period it would take £5.4bn per annum to provide a safe and fit for purpose health service. That is £1.1bn more than the current budget before any cuts are made. The extent to which my budget falls short of this means that radical changes to the delivery of services will be necessary.

Department of Justice

Loughinisland Report

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made by the Police Ombudsman on the Loughinisland Report; and when he expects the Public Prosecution Service to make a decision on this issue.

(AQW 2313/11)

Minister of Justice (Mr D Ford): I am aware that investigations are still ongoing in both the Police Ombudsman's Office and the PSNI. The Public Prosecution Service does not fall within my responsibilities, and prosecutorial decisions are for the Director of Public Prosecutions alone. I would suggest that you should therefore write to the Acting Director.

Medical Staff Employed by the Prison Service

Mr P Givan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of medical staff employed by the Prison Service, broken down by grade and prison.

(AQW 2327/11)

Minister of Justice: The Northern Ireland Prison Service does not employ any Doctors.

Unwell Prisoners

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Justice whether he will review the practice of (i) transporting unwell prisoners to hospital in blacked-out high security vehicles; and (ii) keeping unwell prisoners in handcuffs when they are receiving treatment, particularly when the prisoner has no history of violence or attempts to escape.

(AQW 2341/11)

Minister of Justice: The standard vehicles used by the Prisoner Escorting and Court Custody Service are fitted with tinted windows in line with the specification used in England and Wales and the Republic of Ireland. This arrangement affords privacy to the prisoners being transported as required under Prison Rule 25(3) and is consistent with the practice of the N.I. Ambulance Service with regard to emergency ambulances. Where it is necessary, unwell prisoners may be transported to hospital by ambulance. The PECCS vehicles were recently inspected by Criminal Justice Inspection N.I. and no concerns were raised about the tinted windows. I therefore have no plans to review this practice.

The practice of handcuffing prisoners when they are being escorted outside of a prison establishment needs to strike a balance between the care of a prisoner and the need to protect prison staff and members of the public. The current Northern Ireland Prison Service instructions do permit handcuffs to be removed during hospital appointments when it is considered safe to do so, taking account of any known risk factors for a particular prisoner and of the ability of the escorting staff to make the consultation area secure. Previous experience in Northern Ireland would indicate a heightened risk of escape during such escorts and I am therefore content that the current safeguards are appropriate.

Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Northern Ireland Alternatives

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of referrals to the Public Prosecution Service in each of the last five years from (i) Community Restorative Justice Ireland; and (ii) Northern Ireland Alternatives, either directly or via the PSNI.

(AQW 2364/11)

Minister of Justice: Formal case referrals from the Public Prosecution Service to Community-based Restorative Justice (CBRJ) schemes are governed by a CBRJ Protocol published in February 2007. All case referrals are directed through PSNI.

The first schemes affiliated to Northern Ireland Alternatives were accredited in August 2007 and the first schemes affiliated to Community Restorative Justice Ireland were accredited in July 2008. No referrals were processed prior to 2008.

In 2008, 2 referrals were received by the Public Prosecution Service from Northern Ireland Alternatives. The 2 cases involved 3 offenders and both were approved.

In 2009, 4 referrals were received by the Public Prosecution Service from Northern Ireland Alternatives. The 4 cases involved 6 offenders and all were approved. 2 referrals were received from CRJI involving 2 offenders. One of these referrals was approved by the Public Prosecution Service, the other was not.

In 2010 to date, 2 cases were received by the Public Prosecution Service from Northern Ireland Alternatives involving 5 offenders. One case has been approved by the Public Prosecution Service; the second is currently receiving consideration.

Accreditation of CBRJ schemes has led to greatly improved relationships with police and other statutory sector agencies in communities where this has been historically difficult. Schemes are additionally facilitating community interaction with police and providing support on a range of matters that extend beyond the confines of the low level criminal offences dealt with under the Protocol.

Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Northern Ireland Alternatives

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice to detail the level of funding his Department allocated to (i) Community Restorative Justice Ireland; and (ii) Northern Ireland Alternatives, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2365/11)

Minister of Justice: I would refer the member to the response provided to the question AQW 762/11 answered on 8th October 2010. (Official written answer booklet 8th October 2010).

Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Northern Ireland Alternatives

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of internal and external appeals against the decisions of Community Restorative Justice Ireland; and (ii) Northern Ireland Alternatives.

(AQW 2366/11)

Minister of Justice: The Protocol for Community-based Restorative Justice Schemes, published in February 2007, sets out the minimum standards for complaints mechanisms required of accredited CBRJ schemes in dealing with matters for which the Department has responsibility. Each scheme is required to have an internal, and an independent, external complaints mechanism available to every victim and offender who engages with the schemes. The handling of such complaints and associated records are subject to inspection by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate.

There have been no internal or external appeals against the decisions of Community Restorative Justice Ireland or Northern Ireland Alternatives on matters on which the schemes account to the Department.

Cost of Transporting Prisoners to and from Court

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the costs to the Prison Service of transporting prisoners to and from court in each of the last three years; and how these costs have altered since the increased use of video-link facilities.

(AQW 2387/11)

Minister of Justice: The Prisoner Escorting and Court Custody Service (PECCS) carries out a range of escorting functions including scheduled hospital appointments, police interviews and court productions. Separate figures are not maintained to breakdown the costs for each type of escort and therefore it is not possible to identify the costs of transporting prisoners to court in each of the last three years. The overall running costs for PECCS for the last three years are set out below. These costs do not include capital costs such as the purchase of new vehicles.

2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010
£5,886k	£5,604k	£5,059k

Running costs reduced during this period largely because Prison Officers were redeployed to prison establishments and were replaced by Prisoner Custody Officers on different terms and conditions of service.

Although provisions in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 enable the use of live links in a greater range of circumstances, including some preliminary hearings and sentencing, the uptake during this period has not significantly increased. The figures are set out below.

	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010
Hearings by Live Link	9872	10319	8511

This issue is currently being examined to understand the reasons and to consider how best to promote the use of live links. The recent Criminal Justice Inspection report on Prisoner Escort and Court

Custody Arrangements in Northern Ireland commended the use of video links and recommended that the maximum benefit of video-linking should be realised by assigning a court full-time to video-linked hearings. This recommendation is being considered by NICTS in conjunction with NIPS.

Legal Aid Bill

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, to detail, as a percentage, how much of the annual legal aid bill was spent on (i) civil cases; and (ii) criminal cases in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2401/11)

Minister of Justice:

Financial Year	Civil Legal Aid Expenditure %	Criminal Legal Aid Expenditure %	Total Legal Aid Expenditure £'m
2008/09	39% (£32.5m)	61% (£50.6m)	83.1
2009/10	38% (£36.9m)	62% (£60.0m)	96.9

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Justice how much his Department has spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2432/11)

Minister of Justice: The Department of Justice came into existence on 12th April 2010. Details of expenditure on capital projects in the Strangford constituency before that date are a matter for the previous department.

Equal Pay Claim

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the equal pay claim for civilian employees of the PSNI; and when he expects this issue to be resolved.

(AQW 2480/11)

Minister of Justice: The question of liability in respect of equal pay continues to be the subject of discussions between PSNI, NI Policing Board, DFP and DOJ. I remain limited in what I can say; however I continue in my determination to resolve the matter as soon as possible.

Agenda NI

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Justice how much his Department and its agencies have spent on (i) articles and adverts in Agenda NI; (ii) subscriptions to Agenda NI; and (iii) payments for staff attending conferences organised by BMF Conferences since May 2007.

(AQW 2506/11)

Minister of Justice: The Department of Justice came into existence on 12th April 2010. Details of expenditure relating to Agenda NI or conferences organised by BMF Conferences before that date are a matter for the previous department.

Expenditure for the Department of Justice and its agencies is shown in the table below:

	Agenda NI Articles & Adverts	Agenda NI Subscriptions	BMF Conferences
Department Of Justice Core	£0	£0	£0
Northern Ireland Prison Service	£0	£35	£0
Compensation Agency	£0	£0	£0

	Agenda NI Articles & Adverts	Agenda NI Subscriptions	BMF Conferences
Forensic Science Northern Ireland	£0	£0	£0
Youth Justice Agency	£0	£109	£545
Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service	£0		£1,116
Total	£0	£144	£1,661

The expenditure shown above is from 1st April 2010 to 31st October 2010 as, under Machinery of Government rules, the DOJ will account for expenditure from 1st April 2010.

Pay Award for PSNI Civilian Staff

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an update on the 2009 pay scales for civilian employees of the PSNI; (ii) when these pay scales will be implemented; and (iii) the reasons for the delay.

(AQW 2512/11)

Minister of Justice: On 9 April 2010 the NIO gave approval to the new assimilated pay scales to be applied to the relevant grades in PSNI, reflecting established practice that the police staff enjoyed NICS terms. The approval role under corporate governance arrangements for the PSNI, transferred to the Department of Justice following devolution of Police and Justice in April 2010.

Following devolution, the PSNI and other ALBs of the Department of Justice have been required to complete submissions for the approval of their pay remit. There continues to be discussion between the DFP, DOJ and PSNI on a number of details. This approval process is necessary to ensure that DFP have proper oversight of the use of public money.

I am determined that the matter is resolved as soon as possible.

Under 18 and Over 65: Convicted of Criminal Offences

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of Justice how many people (i) under the age of 18; and (ii) over the age of 65 have been convicted of a criminal offence in each of the last four years.

(AQW 2525/11)

Minister of Justice: The numbers under the age of 18 and over 65 convicted of an offence at court are given in Table 1 below.

Data cover the calendar years 2003-2006 (the latest year for which figures are currently available) and are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

TABLE 1: NUMBER CONVICTED – AGED UNDER 18 AND OVER 65, 2003-2006

Age	2003	2004	2005	2006
Under 18	1,588	1,588	1,455	1,273
Over 65 ¹	180	197	180	151

1 Excludes 65 year olds.

Fire Alarms in Prisons

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of Justice to detail, for each of the last three years, the number of fire alarms in each prison that required the attendance of the Fire and Rescue Service, and of these (i) how many were false alarms; and (ii) the cost incurred for these call-outs.

(AQW 2529/11)

Minister of Justice: The tables below show the number of responses by the Fire and Rescue Service to incidents at Maghaberry and Magilligan prisons over the last three years. There have been no incidents at Hydebank Wood during the period.

MAGHABERRY

Year	Actual fires	False alarms
2008	4	0
2009	3	0
2010	1	0

MAGILLIGAN

Year	Actual fires	False alarms
2008	4	4
2009	3	3
2010	1	5

The Northern Ireland Prison Service did not incur costs for any of the call outs.

Police Ombudsman

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of Justice (i) to outline any recent discussions he has had with the Police Ombudsman, including what subjects were discussed; (ii) when he intends to hold further meetings with the Police Ombudsman; and (iii) whether he intends to discuss (a) the inquiry into the killing of six men in O'Toole's Bar, Loughinisland; and (b) publishing a report in relation to this inquiry.

(AQW 2530/11)

Minister of Justice: I have met the Police Ombudsman on a number of occasions since my election as Minister and discussed a range of issues. I intend to discuss the development of long-term policing objectives in the coming weeks. As the Police Ombudsman's investigation into the Loughinisland murders remains a live investigation it would be inappropriate for me as Minister to discuss it with the Ombudsman.

Pay Award for PSNI Civilian Staff

Mr P Frew asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an update on the 2009 pay award for civilian employees of the PSNI; and (ii) when he expects this issue to be resolved.

(AQW 2533/11)

Minister of Justice: On 9 April 2010 the NIO gave approval to the new assimilated pay scales to be applied to the relevant grades in PSNI, reflecting established practice that the police staff enjoyed NICS terms. The approval role under corporate governance arrangements for the PSNI, transferred to the Department of Justice following devolution of Police and Justice in April 2010.

Following devolution, the PSNI and other ALBs of the Department of Justice have been required to complete submissions for the approval of their pay remit. There continues to be discussion between

the DFP, DOJ and PSNI on a number of details. This approval process is necessary to ensure that DFP have proper oversight of the use of public money.

I am determined that the matter is resolved as soon as possible.

Improving Crime Detection Rates

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister of Justice to outline the responsibilities of his Department in relation to improving crime detection rates, as distinct from the operational role of the PSNI.
(AQW 2555/11)

Minister of Justice: It is one of my Department's key objectives to work in partnership with the PSNI, the Policing Board and the wider community to address crime. The detection of crime is a critical element of that task.

As Justice Minister it is my responsibility to ensure the police are adequately resourced to deliver the best possible policing service and to encourage public confidence in policing. Public confidence fosters increased engagement between the public and the police which is essential for the detection of crime. One of the key objectives in the current Programme for Government is to lead a debate on what a new Community Safety Strategy should include, with an agreed Strategy to be published by March 2011. The delivery of the Community Safety Strategy would encourage public confidence in policing, and subsequently support the police in the improvement of detection rates.

The Chief Constable is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board for all aspects of PSNI performance including detection rates. I, in turn, will continue to support the role of the Policing Board in setting the policing priorities for Northern Ireland and securing the effectiveness and efficiency of the PSNI.

The detection rate in Northern Ireland for all crimes for the period April to October 2010 stood at 33.9% compared to 24.9% for the same period in 2009, an increase of 9% points.

Civil Service Pay Award

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to outline the reasons for the delay in implementing the NICS 2009 pay award for civilian employees of the PSNI.
(AQW 2597/11)

Minister of Justice: On 9 April 2010 the NIO gave approval to the new assimilated pay scales to be applied to the relevant grades in PSNI, reflecting established practice that the police staff enjoyed NICS terms. The approval role under corporate governance arrangements for the PSNI, transferred to the Department of Justice following devolution of Police and Justice in April 2010.

Following devolution, the PSNI and other ALBs of the Department of Justice have been required to complete submissions for the approval of their pay remit. There continues to be discussion between the DFP, DOJ and PSNI on a number of details. This approval process is necessary to ensure that DFP have proper oversight of the use of public money.

I am determined that the matter is resolved as soon as possible.

Equal Pay Claim for PSNI Staff

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Justice why the equal pay claim for PSNI staff has not yet been implemented.
(AQW 2599/11)

Minister of Justice: The question of a potential Equal Pay settlement for police support staff continues to be the subject of discussions between DOJ, PSNI, NIPB and DFP. I remain limited in what I can say; however I continue in my determination to resolve the matter as soon as possible.

Sean Gerard Cahill Wrongly Released from Prison

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice why Sean Gerard Cahill was wrongly released from prison on 24 November 2010, but this was not realised or made public until 30 November 2010.

(AQW 2605/11)

Minister of Justice: Sean Gerard Cahill attended Lagside Court on 24 November on a charge of aggravated vehicle taking. He was sentenced to one month's imprisonment, however subsequent sentence calculation confirmed that his sentence for this offence had already been served whilst on remand.

He was erroneously released from custody because subsequent checks carried out whilst Mr Cahill was still being detained in the court custody area failed to show that he should have been returned to custody to appear before Lisburn Magistrates Court by video link on 30 November 2010 on separate charges of robbery, possession of an offensive weapon and taking a vehicle without the owner's consent.

The error was discovered on 30 November 2010 when the NI Courts and Tribunal Service contacted Maghaberry Prison to query why Mr Cahill had not been produced as directed.

I was informed of the error by the Prison Service on the afternoon of the 30 November and made a public statement later that day, as soon as details were confirmed.

I immediately demanded that a disciplinary investigation should be launched. That investigation is underway and is focussing on establishing whether the incident was as a result of human error, systems failure or a combination of both and expect a report within two weeks. Early indications are that the circumstances of this case differ significantly from the cases of prisoners Paliutis and Cummins who were also erroneously released recently and that they almost certainly involve a degree of systems error. Additional measures have been put in place to further protect against a recurrence of this type of incident.

PSNI continue in their efforts to return prisoner Cahill to custody and the victims of his alleged offences have been informed.

Victims of Violent Crime

Ms M Ritchie asked the Minister of Justice how much has been paid in compensation to victims of violent crime in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2738/11)

Minister of Justice:

Financial Year	Criminal Injuries 1988 Order	Tariff Scheme (Introduced 2002)	Total
2005/06	£23,773,880.57	£15,207,312.92	£38,981,193.49
2006/07	£16,623,281.17	£14,624,042.37	£31,247,323.54
2007/08	£11,489,350.19	£14,655,259.06	£26,144,609.25
2008/09	£7,732,899.78	£13,037,265.64	£20,770,165.42
2009/10	£8,817,607.00	£12,540,731.00	£21,358,338.00

Pension/Gratuity Payments to Royal Ulster Constabulary Reservists

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Justice to outline the timescale for the payment of the gratuity for former police reservists.

(AQW 2770/11)

Minister of Justice: The Department intends that all of the £20m provided by HM Treasury will be utilised by the PTR Gratuity scheme. The level of payment for each eligible applicant will be administered on a points system depending on length of service. The amount of money attached to each point will depend on the number of successful claimants after applications have closed. The closing date for applications is 4 February 2011. It is the aim of the Department to have all payments processed before the end of the 2010/11 financial year.

Department for Regional Development

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11 and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2283/11)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): One intern was facilitated within DRD in 2010/11. Any potential opportunities for such placements in 2011/12 have not yet been assessed.

Water Meters

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria used to determine whether Bed and Breakfast properties and other small businesses are eligible for a water meter; and whether this criteria is used for rented accommodation.

(AQW 2291/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that metering is the preferred method of billing non-domestic properties and it has undertaken an extensive programme to install meters, where practicable, irrespective of the business type. In cases where it is not possible to install a meter, non-domestic customers are charged on an unmeasured basis using the Nett Annual Value of the property.

Classification of non-domestic properties is taken from the non-domestic valuation list developed by Land and Property Services (LPS) for rating purposes. Bed and Breakfast establishments, where identified as such by LPS, are included on the non-domestic list and are billed for water and sewerage services.

Rented accommodation is normally designated by LPS as domestic property and therefore not billed for water and sewerage services.

Single Tender Actions and Contract Extensions

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 911/11 and AQW 416/11, to outline the reasons why the written answers were revised and why the figure given for the number of single tender actions and contract extensions issued by Roads Service changed.

(AQW 2300/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The two Assembly Questions that were revised, namely AQW 911/11 and AQW 416/11 related to single tender actions only.

The answers to the above Assembly Questions were revised and the figures in the associated tables were changed because my original answers erroneously provided details of a single tender action (Sustrans Research), which was issued in 2004/05 and not in 2005/06, as originally reported. Consequently, as both questions were seeking information on the period 2005/06 to 2009/10, details of the Sustrans Research STA should not have been included in my response to AQW 416/11, or my response to the pursuant question AQW 911/11.

Brown Tourist Road Directional Signs

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to list the sports grounds or facilities which currently have brown tourist road directional signs; and (ii) how many brown tourist road directional signs are currently erected in each constituency.

(AQW 2307/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has developed a policy jointly with the NI Tourist Board regarding the provision of tourist signs in the North. Under this policy, all enquiries regarding tourist signing are initially dealt with by the relevant local council. Roads Service does not hold an historical inventory of tourist signing provided and is therefore unable to provide the information requested by the Member. However, local councils may have a record of existing tourist signing, as part of their development of an inventory of tourist destinations, and may be in a position to supply the information requested.

Capital Projects in the Strangford Constituency

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development how much has been spent on capital projects in the Strangford constituency, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2331/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of its expenditure in the format requested. However, it does hold an analysis of total capital expenditure, on a financial year basis by Council area. The most relevant council areas in this case Ards, Castlereagh & Down and figures for those areas have been used to provide information for the Strangford constituency.

I should explain that Roads Service's total expenditure on capital includes major capital schemes, minor capital schemes, street lighting renewal, land, capital structural maintenance and other capital activities.

In addition, following the adoption by the NICS of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) in 2009/10, and to comply with International Accounting Standards, some structural maintenance activities were reclassified as capital. These were classified as resource prior to 2009/10.

I should also explain that Roads Service allocates its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas on the basis of need. 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 time savings, 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 that district council, or to the constituency or county in which they are implemented.

The table below details the total capital expenditure for the past 3 years covering the period 2007/08 to 2009/10 for each of above council areas.

	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	Total
	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
Ards	1,960	8,667	6,088	16,715
Castlereagh	1,316	444	3,822	5,582
Down	986	1,341	3,877	6,204
Total	4,262	10,452	13,787	28,501

I have been advised by NI Water (NIW) that expenditure on capital projects in each of the last three years in the Strangford constituency is, as detailed in the table below.

Year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Amount (£M)	7.4	17.7	16.6

NIW estimates that £7 million will be invested in the Strangford constituency during 2010/11.

The following table details how much has been spent on Ulsterbus capital projects in the Strangford constituency over the last three years.

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
	£'000	£'000	£'000
Bus Stations			
Refurbish paint at depots and stations		8	
Workshops & Garages			
Building Condition Upgrade Programme		20	
Ballygowan Bus Park			6
Total		28	6

In addition, my Department has invested, over these financial years, in the purchase of new modern buses, some of which have been deployed in the Strangford constituency.

B8 Route at Main Street, Hilltown

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to introduce traffic control measures on the B8 route at Main Street, Hilltown.

(AQW 2338/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the B8 Main Street, Hilltown has been traffic calmed in accordance with the standards for this type of road within a town environment.

Northern Ireland Water: Redundancies

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are any plans to introduce compulsory redundancies in Northern Ireland Water; and if he will make a statement on this issue.

(AQW 2344/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has launched a number of Voluntary Early Retirement and Voluntary Early Severance schemes for 2010/11 to assist in the requirement to reduce employee numbers in line with the Price Control 2010 reduction target. It is the company's stated aim to achieve the required 2010/11 reduction in employee numbers purely through voluntary means.

NI Water: Bills

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of bills sent by NI Water in each of the last three years where customers were (i) over-charged; and (ii) under-charged.

(AQW 2345/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the number of bills issued in each of the last three years which resulted in overcharging and undercharging, is included in the table below:

Year	Number of bills issued resulting in overcharging	Number of bills issued resulting in undercharging
2007/08	11,827	5,622
2008/09	13,016	5,954
2009/10	12,517	5,687

It should be noted that there a number of reasons why a customer may have been overcharged or undercharged including errors in the information supplied by the customer, errors in the reading and billing processes and legacy errors in customer records which are being identified and addressed through data quality improvement projects.

Staff Suspensions

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of staff in his Department, its agencies and arms-length bodies who have been suspended in each of the last three years; and (ii) the amount of wages and salaries, to date, paid to these employees during their suspensions.

(AQW 2346/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Details in respect of staff in DRD and its arms length bodies are set out in the table below.

	2007/08		2008/09		2009/10	
	Number of staff suspended	Salary Paid (£)	Number of staff suspended	Salary Paid (£)	Number of staff suspended	Salary Paid (£)
DRD (including Roads Service)	4	5,466	2	496	2	11,079
Northern Ireland Water	3	20,015	3	7,331	0	0
NI Transport Holding Company/ Translink	5*	28,324*	5*	11,620*	5*	12,099*

* Figures for Translink are best estimates. Records are not held centrally and verification would incur disproportionate cost.

Upgrade of the Coleraine to Derry Railway Line

Mr Pól Callaghan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has sought a cost estimate for work on the planned upgrade of the Coleraine to Derry railway line to be carried out at night or weekends, to allow the line to remain open; and if so, to provide a breakdown of the estimate.

(AQW 2360/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have informed me that in reviewing the various options for the relay, the project team concluded that night and weekend work would result in costs of between 185% and 200% more than the baseline option of completing the work by closing the line. It would also mean the duration of the works would increase from 12 months to potentially 24 months resulting in disruption to services over a period of two years instead of the closure of the line for one year.

Given these significant costs and time increases, the Economic Appraisal and all the subsequent planning has moved forward on the basis of a full blockade strategy i.e closure of the line. However, if the necessary funding is secured to allow the project to proceed, Translink will consider all possible options and alternatives, including shift patterns before work on site commences. Any final decisions will have to take account of resource availability.

Pay and Display Car Parks

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to review (i) the payment structure; and (ii) the management of pay and display car parks.

(AQW 2376/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in accordance with Chapter 6 of Managing Public Money (NI), it reviews car parking charges annually. A review is currently being carried out which includes proposals to simplify the car parking charges structure.

Roads Service has also advised that, since November 2006, its Pay and Display car parks have been managed and operated by NSL Services Group (formerly NCP). The current contract with NSL expires in October 2012 and, in advance of that date, Roads Service will be undertaking a tendering and procurement process in relation to a new enforcement and car park management contract.

Pay and Display Car Parks

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of money collected at pay and display car parks in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2377/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the amount of money collected at Pay and Display car parks, in each of the last three years, is detailed in the table below:-

Financial Year	2008/08	2008/09	2009/10
Amount	£4.6 million	£4.69 million	£4.64 million

VAT is payable on all monies collected and has not been deducted from the figures provided above.

Revenue generated by income from car parking, as well as from Penalty Charge Notices and other charges received, is used to supplement the overall financing of Roads Service.

I would point out that the cost of managing off-street car parks and enforcing the on-street parking restrictions exceed the total revenue received.

Parking and Traffic Issues in Whiteabbey and Jordanstown

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department, in conjunction with Newtownabbey Borough Council, the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, the Planning Service and business owners and residents of the Whiteabbey and Jordanstown area, will work towards a co-ordinated approach to address the parking and traffic issues in those areas.

(AQW 2379/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has, and will continue to engage with Newtownabbey Borough Council, Planning Service and other parties as appropriate, to address issues of mutual concern.

As I advised the Member in my response to his Assembly Question, AQW 2378/11, my officials will report on these matters to both Newtownabbey Borough Council and to you later this month.

Jordanstown Train Station

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) whether plans for a park and ride facility at Jordanstown Train Station have been drawn up; (ii) the reasons why the plans have not been progressed; and (iii) when he expects the plans to be implemented, given the expected increase in passenger numbers due to the new 4000 series stock.

(AQW 2380/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Plans for Park and Ride facilities at railway stations and halts on the network, including the station at Jordanstown, have been drawn up. The project for a Park and Ride facility at Jordanstown has to be considered against constraints on available capital funding and likely benefits from other capital projects in the Translink capital plan.

My Department is presently carrying out a strategic review of Park and Ride facilities with the aim of developing proposals for future provision which would offer the best prospect of maximising modal shift. The review is currently ongoing and no decisions have yet been taken. The implementation of Park and Ride will be taken forward in a more constrained budgetary context but it is hoped that a strong case can be made for capital and resource investment in park and ride generally.

Jordanstown Train Station

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development why Jordanstown Train Station is not served by a park and ride facility, similar to the provision at Whitehead, Carrickfergus and Whiteabbey.

(AQW 2382/11)

Minister for Regional Development: While it has been possible to complete some Park and Ride projects on the Railways network, Translink have had to review and prioritise their capital expenditure in light of the constraints on available capital grant. The Jordanstown project is not being taken forward at this time as it offered lower benefits and cost more per space, when compared with other capital schemes. The project has been deferred but Translink will keep it under review.

My Department is presently carrying out a strategic review of Park and Ride facilities with the aim of developing proposals for future provision which would offer the best prospect of maximising modal shift. The review is currently ongoing and no decisions have yet been taken. The implementation of Park and Ride will be taken forward in a more constrained budgetary context and this may impact on the ability to deliver priority projects that may be identified in the review.

A8 Road

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A8 road project and whether funding pledged by the Republic of Ireland will be honoured.

(AQW 2403/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise the Member that, on 5 August 2009, I announced the preferred route for the 14 kilometre section of the A8 Belfast to Larne dual carriageway between Coleman's Corner roundabout and Ballyrickard Road.

In January 2010, my Department's Roads Service appointed a contractor to contribute to the development of the preferred route and give specific advice on construction issues. This will provide the project team with the opportunity to consider construction issues at an early stage in the project. This contractor will eventually construct the scheme.

A series of one to one meetings are currently taking place between the designers and the landowners directly affected to consider detailed access arrangements and accommodation works.

The publication of the draft Vesting Order, Direction Order and Environmental Statement is programmed for January 2011, followed by a Public Inquiry later in 2011.

The Southern Government confirmed its commitment in 2007 to make a £400 million contribution to the A5 and A8 projects and the Executive agreed, in principle, to take forward both projects. Furthermore, at the North South Ministerial Council plenary session, held in July 2009, terms were agreed on the funding to be provided.

During the intervening period, the Southern Government has reiterated its commitment to these projects on various occasions.

Roads Infrastructure in the Strangford Constituency

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a breakdown of the total investment in the roads infrastructure in the Strangford constituency since May 2007.

(AQW 2419/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of its expenditure in the format requested. However, it does hold an analysis of total annual capital expenditure by Council area. For the purposes of reply, details of the total capital expenditure in the Ards, Down and Castlereagh Council areas are set out in the table below.

Roads Service total expenditure on capital includes major capital schemes, minor capital schemes, street lighting renewal, land, capital structural maintenance and other capital activities.

Following the move of the NICS to International Financial Reporting Standards in the 2009/10 financial year, and to comply with International Accounting Standards, the structural maintenance activities of resurfacing, reconstruction, surface dressing and structural drainage were reclassified as capital expenditure. Prior to 2009/10, these activities were classified as resource expenditure. Therefore, in the table below, Capital Structural Maintenance is shown as nil in both 2007/08 and 2008/09.

I should also explain that Roads Service allocates its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all District Council areas on the basis of need with major road improvements prioritised by taking a broad range of criteria into account. These include strategic planning policy, traffic flow, accidents numbers, potential travel time savings, 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 that district council area.

Details of the total capital expenditure for the past three financial years, covering the period 2007/08 to 2009/10 for Ards, Down and Castlereagh Council areas, are set out in the table below:-

District Council	Capital Activity	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Down	Major Capital	294,000	341,000	272,000
	Minor Capital	523,000	512,000	672,000
	Road Lighting Capital	53,000	266,000	153,000
	Other Capital	107,000	157,000	171,000
	Land Under Acquisition	9,000	65,000	92,000
	Capital Structural Maintenance	Nil	Nil	2,517,000
	Total Capital	986,000	1,341,000	3,877,000
Ards	Major Capital	23,000	7,065,000	2,448,000
	Minor Capital	439,000	784,000	801,000
	Road Lighting Capital	178,000	195,000	230,000
	Other Capital	162,000	580,000	105,000
	Land Under Acquisition	1,158,000	43,000	46,000
	Capital Structural Maintenance	Nil	Nil	2,457,000
	Total Capital	1,960,000	8,667,000	6,088,000
Castlereagh	Major Capital	Nil	7,000	Nil
	Minor Capital	811,000	252,000	1,902,000
	Road Lighting Capital	159,000	56,000	39,000
	Other Capital	346,000	115,000	341,000
	Land Under Acquisition	Nil	14,000	16,000
	Capital Structural Maintenance	Nil	Nil	1,525,000
	Total Capital	1,316,000	444,000	3,822,000

Additional Train Services

Mr P Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will consider (i) additional train services between 14.10 and 16.00 or 16.10 and 18.00 from Belfast to Londonderry: or (ii) extending the 16.28 from Belfast to Ballymena so that it continues to Londonderry.

(AQW 2423/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink advise that currently they do not have the resources to provide increased frequency in services to the North West between 14:10 hours and 18:00 hours. They recognise that there are large numbers of passengers travelling to the North West on Friday afternoons

and whenever possible will add additional capacity to the 16:10 service to Derry by using carriages available from elsewhere on the network.

They also advise that if the 16:28 train from Belfast to Ballymena was extended through to Derry there would be no train in Belfast to operate the 18:10 service through to Portrush.

The problems that are occurring on the Belfast to Derry line are arising because of the increased numbers of passengers using the line which is an indicator of the recent improvement in the services. I am hopeful that some of the current problems can be tackled when the 20 new trains are introduced to service on the overall network and additional trains are deployed on the Derry line. This is scheduled to happen in 2013, following completion of the Coleraine to Derry track relay, which I am committed to. Along with revenue subsidy to NI Railways, this project is subject to Executive decisions on the budget.

Belfast to Londonderry Train Service

Mr P Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures could be introduced to prevent overcrowding on the 16.00 train service from Belfast to Londonderry.

(AQW 2424/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have advised that they continuously review demand patterns right across the network. They recognise that there are large numbers of passengers travelling to the North West on Friday afternoons and whenever possible will add additional capacity to the 16.10 service to Derry by using carriages available from elsewhere on the network.

The problems that are occurring on the Belfast to Derry line are arising because of the increased numbers of passengers using the line which is an indication of the recent improvement in the services. I am hopeful that these problems can be addressed when the 20 new trains are introduced to service on the overall network and additional trains are deployed on the Derry line. This is scheduled to happen in 2013.

Belfast to Londonderry Train Service

Mr P Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he would consider authorising the use of ex Gatwick Express stock to augment the 16.00 Belfast to Londonderry train service.

(AQW 2425/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink advise that the ex Gatwick Express rolling stock is part of their strategic reserve fleet. The primary reason the Gatwick train has not been placed in service in recent times is that these are locomotive-hauled carriages which are not suitable for short haul commuter type operations. They have been kept primarily to back up the cross-border Enterprise fleet.

The problems that are occurring on the Belfast to Derry line are arising because of the increased numbers of passengers using the line which is an indication of the improvement in the services. I am hopeful that these problems can be tackled when the 20 new trains are introduced to service on the network and additional trains are deployed on the Derry line. This is scheduled to happen in 2013.

Derry to Dublin Bus Route

Mr P Callaghan asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passengers used the Derry to Dublin bus service in each of the past three years, broken down by (i) Ulsterbus issued tickets; and (ii) Bus Eireann issued tickets.

(AQW 2448/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I am informed by Translink that the information is not readily available in the format requested as it does not keep records of tickets issued by Bus Eireann. The table below details passenger journeys on the service from Derry to Dublin for passengers who have purchased tickets from Translink for the last three financial years.

Year	2008/09	2009/10	2010 (April – Oct)
Passenger Journeys	71982	68399	42227

Freight and Non-freight Customers

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many (i) freight; and (ii) non-freight customers travelled by boat between Northern Ireland and Scotland in each of the last five years, broken down by each route travelled.

(AQW 2459/11)

Minister for Regional Development:

(i) The information requested is not compiled by the Department for Regional Development.

The Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's Northern Ireland Ports Traffic publication 2010 details the number of freight units passing through each port but not by each route travelled. The table below is an extract from the 2010 Report covering the period 2005-2009 in respect of freight units through the ports of Belfast and Larne.

NUMBER OF FREIGHT UNITS¹ PASSING THROUGH BELFAST AND LARNE PORTS, 2005-2009

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast	397,124	403,564	412,613	390,583	363,695
Larne	359,427	360,140	371,547	353,402	324,404

1 Figures relate to the total number of freight units travelling through each port i.e. inbound and outbound combined.

Freight units are defined as containers, road goods vehicles, unaccompanied trailers, rail wagons, shipborne port-to-port trailers and shipborne barges.

Source: NI Ports Traffic publication, DETI

(ii) The Department for Regional Development's Annual Transport Statistics Report outlines the total number of passengers carried on all ferry services through the North's ports, including from Scotland, over a five-year retrospective period. The table below is an extract from the 2010 Report covering the period 2005-2009.

DOMESTIC SEA PASSENGERS AT NORTHERN IRELAND PORTS¹ 2005-2009

NI Port	GB Port	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast	Heysham	6	5	4	3	3
Belfast	Liverpool	167	171	187	190	187
Belfast	Stranraer	1,235	1,212	1,217	1,104	1,101
Larne	Cairnryan	602	595	646	628	602
Larne	Fleetwood	62	59	61	58	54
Larne	Troon	214	208	231	206	213
Warrenpoint	Heysham	7	7	5	6	7
All NI Ports		2,293	2,257	2,351	2,195	2,167

NI Port	IOM Port	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast	Douglas	18	18	22	21	19
Larne	Douglas ²	2	4	6	3	-
All NI Ports		20	22	28	24	19

Source: Maritime Statistics DfT

- 1 Belfast – Troon route has now been removed from the table as this route closed in December 2004.
- 2 Larne – Douglas route closed in June 2008.

Boat Transport

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many people travelled by boat to Scotland from (i) Belfast; and (ii) Larne in each of the last 24 months.

(AQW 2460/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The information requested is not compiled by the Department for Regional Development.

The Department's Annual Transport Statistics Report outlines the total number of passengers carried on all ferry services through the North's ports, including to Scotland, over a 5-year retrospective period. The table below is an extract from the 2010 Report covering the period 2005-2009.

DOMESTIC SEA PASSENGERS AT NORTHERN IRELAND PORTS¹ 2005-2009

NI Port	GB Port	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast	Heysham	6	5	4	3	3
Belfast	Liverpool	167	171	187	190	187
Belfast	Stranraer	1,235	1,212	1,217	1,104	1,101
Larne	Cairnryan	602	595	646	628	602
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Larne	Troon	214	208	231	206	213
Warrenpoint	Heysham	7	7	5	6	7
All NI Ports		2,293	2,257	2,351	2,195	2,167

NI Port	IOM Port	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast	Douglas	18	18	22	21	19
Larne	Douglas ²	2	4	6	3	-
All NI Ports		20	22	28	24	19

Source: Maritime Statistics DfT

- 1 Belfast – Troon route has now been removed from the table as this route closed in December 2004.
- 2 Larne – Douglas route closed in June 2008.

Boat Transport

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many people travelled by boat from Scotland to (i) Belfast; and (ii) Larne in each of the last 24 months.

(AQW 2461/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The information requested is not compiled by the Department for Regional Development.

The Department's Annual Transport Statistics Report outlines the total number of passengers carried on all ferry services through the North's ports, including from Scotland, over a five-year retrospective period. The table below is an extract from the 2010 Report covering the period 2005-2009.

DOMESTIC SEA PASSENGERS AT NORTHERN IRELAND PORTS¹ 2005-2009

NI Port	GB Port	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast	Heysham	6	5	4	3	3
Belfast	Liverpool	167	171	187	190	187
Belfast	Stranraer	1,235	1,212	1,217	1,104	1,101
Larne	Cairnryan	602	595	646	628	602
Larne	Fleetwood	62	59	61	58	54
Larne	Troon	214	208	231	206	213
Warrenpoint	Heysham	7	7	5	6	7
All NI Ports		2,293	2,257	2,351	2,195	2,167

NI Port	IOM Port	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belfast	Douglas	18	18	22	21	19
Larne	Douglas ²	2	4	6	3	-
All NI Ports		20	22	28	24	19

Source: Maritime Statistics DfT

- 1 Belfast – Troon route has now been removed from the table as this route closed in December 2004.
- 2 Larne – Douglas route closed in June 2008. This is the first time data on this route have been provided for the publication.

Larne and Belfast Ports

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how much the Executive has invested in (i) Larne port; and (ii) Belfast port in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2462/11)

Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) Nil.
- (ii) Nil.

Infrastructure and Sea Travel Between Northern Ireland and Scotland

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what communication he has had with his counterpart in the Scottish Government regarding improving infrastructure and encouraging sea travel between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

(AQW 2463/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I met and discussed transport issues of mutual interest with Stewart Stevenson MSP, Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change on 30 April 2008. Matters addressed included transport links between the north of Ireland and Scotland and road and rail linkages to the Scottish ports at Loch Ryan.

Roles of Airports

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to rationalise the roles of airports.

(AQW 2483/11)

Minister for Regional Development: There are no statutory powers available to me to regulate or intervene in the commercial roles of privately owned airports.

Devolution of Aviation Powers

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has had any discussions with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to the devolution of aviation powers and the development of an aviation strategy.

(AQW 2484/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have not yet had any such discussions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The British Government announced recently that it will start work in the New Year on development of a new aviation policy framework. I expect this to provide an opportunity for the Executive to consider what would be an appropriate aviation strategy for the region and how it should be delivered, including through devolution of aviation powers.

Installation of Water Meters

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the cost of installing a water meter in every domestic property.

(AQW 2486/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it estimates the cost of installing a water meter in all domestic properties would be in the region of £106 million. This estimate takes into account the number of meter ready chambers already installed at domestic properties since their use began in the 1990s and is based on current tendered rates for meter installation.

There are circumstances where it may not be possible to fit a meter such as shared supplies, engineering difficulties and obstructions.

Disabled Access at Portadown Railway Station

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has had any discussions with Translink in relation to the inadequacy of disabled access in Portadown Railway Station, given that 400,000 journeys operate out of this station each year.

(AQW 2487/11)

Minister for Regional Development: The position regarding Portadown Railway Station has not changed since the answer I provided you on AQW 3152/10 on 11 December 2009. Translink had originally planned to complete the upgrade of Portadown station by 2013 but this has slipped to 2014 owing to

pressures on available capital budgets. It is envisaged that the project will be delivered in phases, with the first phase designed to improve access to the island platform by constructing a footbridge serviced by passenger lifts. In the current plan, which is subject to funding availability and approval, it is envisaged that work would start in 2013 and be completed in 2014. Whilst it is potentially feasible to bring the construction period forward, this will depend on prioritisation of projects depending on budget resources. It is considered that the facilities currently provided are functional but there are clearly plans to invest in the works required when this is feasible.

Road Projects

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any road projects have been put on hold as a result of, or in anticipation of, budgetary cuts.

(AQW 2488/11)

Minister for Regional Development: This has been an exceptional year for my Department's Roads Service, in terms of the delivery of major road projects. In July 2010, I had the pleasure of opening the 12 km Newry Bypass, which is the final dual carriageway link between Belfast and Dublin. On 1 December 2010, I opened a further 21 km of high standard dual carriageway between Dungannon and Ballygawley. In addition, major schemes on the A26 at Ballymena and A29 at Carland Bridge have also been completed, and it is anticipated that the 7 km of dual carriageway from Maydown to the City of Derry airport will open to traffic before Christmas.

Development work is continuing on the programme of Strategic Road Improvements envisaged under the Investment Strategy, as set out in the Investment Delivery Plan for Roads. Implementation of these works will be dependent on the satisfactory progression through the statutory and procurement processes and the availability of funding.

I would also advise the Member that information on all completed and proposed schemes can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from the Roads Service internet site at the following web address: <http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-searchall.htm>

Road Openings

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of road openings in each of the last five years; (ii) the reason for each road opening; (iii) which body or individual requested the road opening; and (iv) what checks were carried out on the quality of the reinstatement of the roads.

(AQW 2490/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the number of road openings carried out in each of the last five years is outlined in the table below:-

Year	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Number of openings	51,480	52,455	41,230	35,530	36,260

These openings were for the purposes of placing apparatus, mainly belonging to utility companies, or for inspecting, maintaining, adjusting, repairing, altering or renewing that apparatus, and for changing its position or removing it. A breakdown of these road openings, by utility company and Rivers Agency, is provided in the table below:-

Utility Company	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Bord Gáis Eireann (NI)	0	75	1150	10	30
BT	4,393	3,860	3,717	3,260	3,260
Bytel	0	0	0	10	0

Utility Company	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Cable & Wireless	24	20	11	10	10
Eircom	3	20	30	60	60
Firmus Energy	0	0	0	1,760	1,020
NIE	3,335	3,090	3,013	3,220	3,670
NI Water	33,820	35,640	25,445	19,620	20,930
Phoenix Natural Gas	8,876	8,760	6,784	5,970	5,490
Rivers Agency	15	10	6	0	10
Virgin Media	1,014	980	1,074	1,610	1,780
Totals	51,480	52,455	41,230	35,530	36,260

Roads Service carries out random inspections of 10% of all openings during reinstatement, 10% upon completion of permanent reinstatement and a further 10% before the end of the reinstatement warranty period. Where defective reinstatements are found, further inspections are carried out to ensure the defects have been remedied. Core samples are taken from a random selection of 400 reinstatements each year, to ensure that the depths and types of materials used in the finished reinstatement are consistent with the required specification.

Roads Service inspectors also carry out additional routine inspections of reinstatements, to ensure that they are performing as required, and will carry out further inspections when they receive reports of defective reinstatements from members of the public.

Gritting of Roads

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development how many agency staff were employed by the Roads Service for road gritting in each of the last two years; and to detail the cost.
(AQW 2494/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service supplements its team of in-house drivers, with drivers sourced through an external contract, to deliver its Winter Salting service. The number of drivers sourced through the external contract and the associated costs, for each of the last two years, are contained in the table below:-

Roads Service – External Contract Gritting Drivers		
Financial Year	Number of Drivers used	Cost
2008-2009	62	£239,000
2009-2010	146	£565,000

Road Construction

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many kilometres of road have been constructed in the Strangford constituency since May 2007.
(AQW 2549/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that approximately 8.67 km of new road has been constructed in the Strangford constituency since May 2007.

This includes 2.67 km at the A20 Southern Distributor and A20 Frederick Street schemes in Newtownards. I can also advise that in the Ards Council area, Roads Service has overseen the construction, and adoption, of approximately 6.0 km of developer-led roads.

Cost of Laying Rail Track

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the cost of laying rail track on an alternative route to avoid recurrent rail disruption in the Upper Bann constituency caused by dissident republicans.

(AQW 2551/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink advise that the cost of a diversionary route such as that suggested cannot be estimated to any degree of accuracy without some form of feasibility study being undertaken. No such study has been commissioned to date.

Treatment of Pavements

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of recent weather conditions, what action his Department is taking to ensure the treatment of pavements near key locations, such as, schools and residential homes.

(AQW 2552/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise the Member that during the most recent review of Roads Service's Winter Service policy, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing such a service, which is largely a manual task, would make it impractical.

However, following the same review, it was proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service would seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as District Councils, to assist in clearing busy town centre footways and pedestrian areas.

At that time, in consultation with NILGA, Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement to try to facilitate this process and a small number of councils signed up to that agreement. Following last year's prolonged cold spell, I asked the Chief Executive of Roads Service to revisit this issue. Roads Service subsequently met with NILGA representatives and new proposals were drawn up. These were issued by NILGA to local Councils for consultation. Regrettably, NILGA has recently advised Roads Service that the new proposed arrangements were rejected by the local councils. However, Roads Service will still write to individual councils offering them the opportunity to sign up to partnering arrangements, as outlined in the new agreement.

With regard to schools, you will be aware that, following the severe wintry conditions experienced at the start of December 2008, I asked my Department's Roads Service to carry out an examination of its operational response to areas around rural schools. This examination resulted in Roads Service introducing enhanced communication arrangements and priority "secondary" salting to the 46 rural schools most affected by weather conditions throughout the winter of 2008/09.

It is appreciated that the list of sites benefiting from these actions is likely to change over time to include more schools, to take account of the extent to which adverse weather can affect different schools at different times.

At the time of the examination of Roads Service's operational response, the criteria for the provision of grit/salt piles and salt bins was also amended, so that these can be provided to affected schools, if requested.

Notwithstanding any of the above, I can confirm that Roads Service continues to provide approximately 3,500 salt boxes and 39,000 grit piles at strategic locations. These can be used by the general public, on a self help basis, to help prevent the formation of snow and ice on pavements and roads.

Residents' Parking Schemes for the South Belfast Area

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the residents parking schemes being considered for the South Belfast area, to detail (i) the number being considered; (ii) the location; (iii) the stage of development; (iv) the outcome of any community surveys; and (v) the expected date of introduction of each scheme.

(AQW 2569/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the four areas currently under consideration for Residents' Parking Schemes within the South Belfast are:

- Markets East of Cromac Street;
- Markets West of Cromac Street;
- Stranmillis village area; and
- Lower Malone.

Discussions with the residents in the Markets East and West areas are ongoing in a bid to identify acceptable scheme proposals. With regards the Stranmillis Lower Malone areas, discussions are well advanced with the respective residents' associations. The scheme proposals have been agreed and officials are now preparing to carry out the informal consultation exercise with the wider community.

Community surveys have not been carried out during the current round of consultation. However, the residents' associations, which represent the four areas, have indicated that there may be the required level of community support to allow residents' parking schemes to be implemented.

The timescale for implementing Residents' Parking Schemes within South Belfast will largely be dependent on the success of achieving support from each of the local communities in the areas under consideration, and on the availability of funding at the time.

Gritting Footpaths

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his Department's policy on gritting footpaths.

(AQW 2607/11)

Minister for Regional Development: During the most recent review of my Department's Roads Service's Winter Service policy, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing such a service, which is largely a manual task, make it impractical.

In the same review, it was proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, Roads Service would seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as District Councils, to assist in clearing busy town centre footways and pedestrian areas.

In consultation with the Local Government Association (NILGA), Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement to try and facilitate this process. A small number of Councils signed up to this agreement, at that time.

Following last year's spell of wintry weather, I asked the Chief Executive of Roads Service to revisit this issue.

Since that time, Roads Service has been negotiating with NILGA and an amended model agreement has been developed. The main change is that the indemnity offered to Councils in the original agreement can now be extended to private sector organisations acting as the Council's sub-contractor or agent.

The partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways, outlined in the new model agreement, have not been endorsed by NILGA. However, Roads Service will still be offering Councils the opportunity to sign up to this agreement for the coming winter.

Notwithstanding the above, Roads Service continues to provide salt boxes and grit piles, at strategic locations. There are approximately 3,500 salt boxes and 39,000 grit piles at present, which can be used by the general public, on a self help basis, to help prevent the formation of snow and ice on pavements and roads.

Rolling Stock on the Bangor Railway Line

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the average age of rolling stock on the Bangor railway line.

(AQW 2608/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have informed me that all vehicles operating on the Bangor line are Class 3000 and were built between 2004 and 2005; therefore the ages of these trains range from 5 to 6 years.

Draft Transportation Strategy

Mr C Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development when the draft Regional Transportation Strategy and Active Travel Strategy will be issued for public consultation.

(AQW 2659/11)

Minister for Regional Development: A revised overarching Regional Transportation Strategy is being prepared by my Department and a draft will be published for public consultation early in 2011. It will emphasise the importance of Active Travel.

My Department also established an Active Travel Forum earlier this year, to bring forward specific recommendations for an Active Travel Strategy to be published following publication of the draft Regional Transportation Strategy.

Director of Customer Services Delivery within NI Water

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) whether the Chief Executive of NI Water met any of the candidates for the post of Director of Customer Services prior to the interview process in December 2009; (ii) where these meetings took place; (iii) the purpose and format of these meetings; and (d) whether any member NI Water staff was involved in arranging the meetings.

(AQW 2683/11)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that (i) its Chief Executive met with a number of candidates for the role of Customer Operations Director (not Director of Customer Services) prior to the formal interview process in December 2009; (ii) the meetings with internal candidates took place in NIW premises and a meeting with an external candidate (that he had worked with in the past) took place in a local restaurant; (iii) the meetings were informal and no information was discussed that was not already in the public domain. No member of NIW staff was involved in arranging the meetings.

The Chief Executive has assured me that none of these meetings impacted on the outcome of the appointments process which was carried out in line with recognised procedures and resulted in a unanimous decision by a three person interview panel.

Grit or Sand for Roads

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development how much grit or sand for roads his Department has stored; and how long these reserves will last.

(AQW 2696/11)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, as part of its pre-season preparations, salt barns, which are strategically placed in depots throughout the North, were filled to capacity.

This salt reserve, of around 65,000 tonnes, is more than enough to treat scheduled roads during a typical winter. However, approximately 29,000 tonnes of that reserve has been used so far this winter, leaving 36,000 tonnes still to be utilised.

Obviously, the length of time that these reserves will last is dependent on the severity of the weather during the remainder of the winter period. However, Roads Service has advised that arrangements are in place to replenish the depleted salt stocks, if necessary.

Road Infrastructure

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he is setting aside additional resources to allow the immediate repair of damage to road infrastructure caused by adverse weather this winter.

(AQW 2777/11)

Minister for Regional Development: Following a series of internal adjustments, my Department's Roads Service has advised of its intention to allocate approximately £3.5 million to its Divisions across the North, to deal with the affects of the adverse weather, including winter service pressures.

However, it is anticipated that the amount of damage caused will be considerable. It is likely that it will take some time for all of the damage to be identified and repaired, subject to the availability of funds.

Department for Social Development

Trophies and Monetary Prizes for Staff Competitions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how much his Department and its arms-length bodies have spent on (i) trophies; and (ii) monetary prizes for staff competitions in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1767/11)

Minister for Social Development (Mr A Attwood): The Department for Social Development provides an in-house quarterly magazine, which includes competitions with voucher prizes. Due to budgetary constraints the magazine has not been produced since spring 2009. A breakdown of prizes in the last three years is provided below. This breakdown includes £50 for vouchers provided in a staff draw as an incentive to complete a survey on the staff magazine in 2007.

2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
£200	£200	NIL

The Housing Executive regularly rewards staff for outstanding performance and customer service. This includes the reward of both trophies and monetary awards to staff. The Housing Executive has advised that in relation to trophies it has spent the following monies in each of the last three years:-

2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
£5,027.14	£6,554.97	£10,741.89

The figures for (i) trophies relate to a piece of engraved Tyrone crystal for 11 awards, a perpetual shield or cup for four awards and a framed certificate. The figures also include costs for crystal given to staff who attained 25 years service.

In relation to monetary prizes the Housing Executive advised that it has spent the following monies in relation to staff competitions such as the Housing Executive's Annual Awards in each of the last three years:-

2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
£11,120	£18,650	£22,125

In relation to (ii) all winners, whether individual or members of a team, receive £250 each. All members of staff short-listed but who do not win an award receive a monetary award as follows:

- Where three members of staff are nominated as a team, each will receive £100.
- Where two members of staff are jointly nominated, each will receive £125.
- Individual members of staff short-listed will receive £250.
- Where a member of staff is nominated for more than one award, only one monetary award will be made.
- All staff nominated but who are not short-listed receive £25.

I have asked the Housing Executive to consider the appropriateness of this type of expenditure, particularly in the current economic climate. From 2011 onwards the Housing Executive has confirmed that awards will be scaled back by at least 50%.

Interns

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many interns his Department has facilitated in 2010/11; and how many it intends to facilitate in 2011/12.

(AQW 2287/11)

Minister for Social Development: The Department participates in the Queens University Belfast Internship Programme. The programme runs on an academic year basis and is administered by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) on behalf of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The role of DFP includes the allocation of placements to Departments.

The Department facilitated two placements in 2009/10, but was not allocated an intern under the scheme for the 2010/11 academic year, as there was no suitable intern placement(s) for the project work identified in the Department. In April 2011, Departments will be invited to participate in the scheme for the 2011/12 academic year. It is likely that the Department will again signal its willingness to facilitate a placement in that year.

Housing Maintenance

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been spent on housing maintenance in the Strangford constituency in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2347/11)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by parliamentary constituency. However, the table below details the Housing Executive's spend on housing maintenance in their Newtownards, Castlereagh and Downpatrick District Offices in each of the last three years.

Newtownards District	2007/08 (£k)	2008/09 (£k)	2009/10 (£k)
Planned Maintenance	631	1004	2176
Response Maintenance	1909	1889	2732
Total	2540	2893	4908

Castlereagh District	2007/08 (£k)	2008/09 (£k)	2009/10 (£k)
Planned Maintenance	1245	1814	1148

Castlereagh District	2007/08 (£k)	2008/09 (£k)	2009/10 (£k)
Response Maintenance	1875	2227	2810
Total	3120	4041	3958

Downpatrick District	2007/08 (£k)	2008/09 (£k)	2009/10 (£k)
Planned Maintenance	708	307	560
Response Maintenance	1539	1693	2032
Total	2247	2000	2592

Fuel Poverty

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently in fuel poverty in each constituency.

(AQW 2348/11)

Minister for Social Development: The 2009 House Condition Survey was predicated on the assumption that the Review of Public Administration would have resulted in the creation of new council areas. The attached table shows the levels of fuel poverty by proposed council area, the information is not available by constituency.

FUEL POVERTY - PROPOSED COUNCIL AREA

	Not in Fuel Poverty		In Fuel Poverty	
	No	%	No	%
East Belfast	17990	54.8	14840	45.2
	4.6		4.9	
South Belfast	19290	61.6	12010	38.4
	5.0		4.0	
West Belfast	10600	46.3	12300	53.7
	2.7		4.1	
North Belfast	19700	53.6	17050	46.4
	5.1		5.6	
Total Belfast	67580	54.6	56200	45.4
	17.4		18.6	
Derry City and Strabane	30520	56.9	23080	43.1
	7.8		7.6	
Armagh City and Bann	38730	53.7	33390	46.3
	10.0		11.0	
Lisburn and Castlereagh	44760	61.8	27680	38.2
	11.5		9.2	

	Not in Fuel Poverty		In Fuel Poverty	
	No	%	No	%
Newry and Down	29430	50.9	28380	49.1
	7.6		9.4	
Antrim and Newtownabbey	30610	57.6	22550	42.4
	7.9		7.5	
Ards and North Down	37090	56.4	28660	43.6
	9.5		9.5	
Causeway Coast	32470	56.2	25280	43.8
	8.3		8.4	
Fermanagh and Omagh	22000	57.2	16450	42.8
	5.7		5.4	
Mid Antrim	30460	56.8	23210	43.2
	7.8		7.7	
Mid Ulster	25500	59.4	17430	40.6
	6.6		5.8	
Total	389150	56.3	302310	43.7
	100.0		100.0	

Housing Benefit

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been overpaid in housing benefit in each of the last three years; and how many people have been detected committing housing benefit fraud in the same period.

(AQW 2349/11)

Minister for Social Development: The amount of Housing Benefit overpaid in each of the last three years as a result of fraud, customer and official error is as follows:-

- 2007/08 £13.7m
- 2008/09 £14.1m
- 2009/10 £17.19m

In relation to the number of people detected committing housing benefit fraud, the figures below are the number of people who had overpayments arising from fraud investigations which resulted in either a sanction or an adjustment to the Housing Benefit award.

- 2007/08 86
- 2008/09 54
- 2009/10 130

The number of people who had Housing Benefit adjusted as a result of data matching exercises (which identified claimants who failed to notify the Housing Executive of a change in circumstances) was:-

- 2007/08 1588*
- 2008/09 984*

■ 2009/10 1883*

* These did not meet the definition of fraud cases; however they formed an important part of the Housing Executive's counter fraud activity.

Finally, in 2009/10, 648 Housing Benefit overpayments were raised following fraud investigations launched by other benefit authorities, for example by the Social Security Agency.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current number of Houses in Multiple Occupation in each constituency.

(AQW 2421/11)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by parliamentary constituency. The Housing Executive maintains a database of known and potential Houses in Multiple Occupation, by Council area, as shown in the table below:-

Council Area	Number of HMOs
Derry	464
Limavady	15
Coleraine	745
Ballymoney	32
Moyle	45
Larne	46
Ballymena	83
Magherafelt	25
Cookstown	34
Strabane	31
Omagh	118
Fermanagh	62
Dungannon & South Tyrone	111
Craigavon	105
Armagh City & District	127
Newry & Mourne	93
Banbridge	27
Down	110
Lisburn	110
Antrim	44
Newtownabbey	178
Carrickfergus	37
North Down	289

Council Area	Number of HMOs
Ards	57
Castlereagh	72
Belfast	6202

Note:

It is likely that there are additional Houses in Multiple Occupation not on the Housing Executive database where landlords have not advised when they created Houses in Multiple Occupation. The Housing Executive has revised the Registration Scheme so that all Houses in Multiple Occupation are now specified for registration. More comprehensive figures will therefore be available as the registration process is completed over coming years.

Return on Investment from Town Centre Regeneration Projects

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (i) the measures used to assess the return on investment from town centre regeneration projects; and (ii) for his assessment of the success of each project.

(AQW 2434/11)

Minister for Social Development: My Department carries out a number of exercises to measure the success of any of its schemes. Evaluation measures are in place to assess the 3 main elements of town centre regeneration work delivered by my Department; i.e. Comprehensive Development schemes, Environmental Improvement schemes and Urban Development Grant schemes, and these are outlined below. All projects are subject to the completion of an Economic Appraisal; each project is assessed and monitored against the achievement of the objectives through a Post Project Evaluation. The Post Project Evaluation compares the outturn against estimated costs and benefits and generally reviews success in achieving objectives and is usually carried out one year after practical completion of a scheme although larger capital projects will have a full evaluation between 3 and 5 years after project completion.

Comprehensive Development

Comprehensive Development contributes to the regeneration of towns and cities through a process of land acquisition, maintenance and disposal.

Indicators of success will vary from project to project but usually include:

- Removal of dereliction;
- Improvement of the physical environmental;
- Job creation;
- Stimulation of local enterprise; and
- Provision of retail, office, industrial/commercial, housing and other facilities.

Environmental Improvement

Public Realm schemes are designed to enhance the local streetscape, open spaces and urban landscape through the use of high quality street surfaces, ornamental street furniture, amenity lighting, decorative signage, public art and semi-mature trees with decorative guards for immediate impact.

Indicators of success will vary from project to project but would usually include:

- Metres of streetscape improved;
- Increase in footfall; and
- Number of man hours of work created in construction industry.

Urban Development Grant

These are discretionary grants used for promoting job creation, inward investment and environmental improvement, by developing vacant, derelict or underused land or buildings in priority areas. It aims to encourage economic, physical and social regeneration of disadvantaged urban areas in Belfast and Derry.

Leverage is the most effective performance indicator and is monitored on a monthly basis. Other indicators such as jobs, floor area, increase in rates and property values are monitored and assessed via the Post Project Evaluations.

Assessment of Individual Projects

In answer to part ii of your question, DSD have conducted numerous projects and providing an individual assessment of success, on each, would be disproportionate from both a time and cost perspective.

However, one recent example of an assessed project was DSD's Victoria Square Comprehensive Development Scheme. The Development has seen a £400m private sector investment into Belfast City Centre, encompassing 800,000 sq ft of new retail, leisure and living space. Approximately half of the retailers in Victoria Square were new to Belfast. 6389 workers were employed on the site during the construction phase from 2004 to March 2008. By December 2009 2436 people were employed in the retail, leisure and support services within Victoria Square. This is a highly acclaimed project and showcases my Departments commitment to achieving social, environmental and economic prosperity in Northern Ireland.

Redevelopment of the Village area of South Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the redevelopment of the Village area of South Belfast.

(AQW 2526/11)

Minister for Social Development: An independently chaired Community Design Team has been formed comprising of 10 local residents. It is seen as a vehicle for Village residents to monitor and discuss progress relevant to the regeneration of the area.

The Community Design Team met with Housing Executive officials in October 2010 where the draft concept plan for the area was discussed and a phasing plan for clearance of the redevelopment area was agreed. Members of the Team have also attended a sustainability conference and visited other housing developments in the city.

The Team are due to meet again with Housing Executive and Housing Association officials in mid December.

Housing Associations

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development (i) which voluntary Housing Associations have ceased to be independent and have merged with another voluntary Housing Association; (ii) how many housing units each of these merged Associations own; and (iii) how many voluntary Housing Associations have agreed to join procurement groups to date.

(AQW 2539/11)

Minister for Social Development:

- (i) No Housing Associations have ceased to be independent and merged with another in 2010.
- (ii) Nil in view of answer (i)
- (iii) 25 Housing Associations have agreed to join procurement groups to date.

Housing Associations

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of voluntary Housing Associations that (i) currently exist; (ii) existed three years ago; and (iii) traded at a net surplus in their most recent financial audit.

(AQW 2568/11)

Minister for Social Development:

- (i) There are currently 33 Registered Housing Associations; (ii) the number of Registered Housing Associations that existed three years ago was 35; and (iii) 28 out of 33 Registered Housing Associations traded at a net surplus in their most recent financial audit.

Please note there are 6 unregistered Housing Associations that are affiliated with Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations. The Department has no regulatory authority over these Associations.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development which weather station readings are used to determine whether Cold Weather Payments should be made in the (i) BT45; and (ii) BT80 postcode areas.

(AQW 2649/11)

Minister for Social Development: Cold Weather Payments are triggered when the average temperature is, or is forecast to be, zero degrees centigrade or below over 7 consecutive days, from November to March. Readings taken at the Aldergrove weather station determine if payments should be made for both the BT45 and BT 80 postcode areas.

For winter 2010/2011 payments will continue to be made at the increased level of £25 for each occurrence.

Cold Weather Payments

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development which postcode areas have benefited from Cold Weather Payments in the last two years; and whether his Department will consider reforming the administration of these payments to ensure that they are paid to all those in need as soon as temperatures fall to zero as opposed to an average of zero over several days.

(AQW 2650/11)

Minister for Social Development: Cold Weather Payments are intended to provide help to vulnerable people during periods of exceptionally cold weather. Payments are triggered when the average temperature is, or is forecast to be, zero degrees centigrade or below over 7 consecutive days, from November to March.

In 2008/09 one Cold Weather Payment was made to qualifying customers living in post code areas BT 24-28, 30-35, 45-48, 60-68, 70-71 and 78-82 (Castlederg and Katesbridge). The total amount paid was £1.84 million.

In 2009/10, three Cold Weather Payments were made to qualifying customers living in all post code areas whilst those living in post code areas BT24-28, 30-35, 45-48, 60-71, 74-82 and 92-94 (Castlederg, Enniskillen and Katesbridge) received five payments. Total payments amounted to £16.87 million.

Starting this winter, the number of weather stations used in the Scheme has been increased from 5 to 7 which will allow areas previously represented by a single weather station to be sub-divided.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Winding-up Allowance

Mr T Elliott asked the Assembly Commission to (i) list all Members who have resigned from the Assembly since 2007; and (ii) to detail how much each Member received in a Winding-up Allowance. **(AQW 2516/11)**

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr P Ramsey): Winding-up allowance is payable under the provisions of the Allowances to Members of the Assembly Act (Northern Ireland) 2000 to former Members of the Assembly. Although the Assembly Question relates to former Members who have resigned, Winding-up allowance is also payable to former Members who do not stand for re-election to the Assembly or are not returned as a Member.

The table below shows the details of those Members who have resigned from the Assembly since April 2007 and the amount of Winding-up allowance that has been claimed in the respective financial year in which claims were paid.

TABLE 1: FORMER MEMBERS - WINDING UP ALLOWANCE PAID

	2009/10	Paid to Date 2010/11	Total
Burnside, David	£15,789.09		£15,789.09
Robinson, Iris	£12,820.39		£12,820.39
Brolly, Francie	£15,286.97		£15,286.97
Hanna, Carmel	£8,960.55	£1,086.80	£10,047.35
Durkan, Mark		£4,545.81	£4,545.81
Dodds, Nigel		£11,544.76	£11,544.76
McCrea, Rev William		£15,484.09	£15,484.09
Paisley Jnr, Ian		£15,828.74	£15,828.74
Shannon, Jim		£15,932.26	£15,932.26
Simpson, David		£10,480.79	£10,480.79
Donaldson, Jeffrey		£15,949.20	£15,949.20
Long, Naomi		£8,990.59	£8,990.59
Total	£52,857.00	£99,843.04	£152,700.04

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.

Revised Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Lisburn Library

In Bound Volume 57, page WA 119, replace the answer to the question (AQW 1449/11) asked by Mr P Givan with:

Since the opening of Lisburn City library on 30 November 2005 until 31 March 2010 there have been 1,287,208 visitors and 19,024 new members.

A specific assessment of Lisburn City libraries' services has not been made by my Department. However performance information supplied by Libraries NI demonstrate that Lisburn City library provides a wide and varied range of outreach programmes aimed at exploiting book, audio and visual resources for all ages, as well as enrichment programmes in Culture, Information, Heritage and Learning to enhance the library experience, increase participation, develop a love of reading and build cultural, social and economic capital.

As such these programmes assist in the delivery of Libraries NI's strategic themes and the Department's key objectives with regard to addressing social exclusion and building community identity.

It is also worth noting that in its first full operational year 2006/07, Lisburn City Library recorded the highest issues of any library in Northern Ireland at 243,099. In addition from the period 30 November 2005 to 31 March 2010 there were 39,097 Active Members, 970,674 Book and Non Book issues and 372,316 Computer Sessions.

Justice

Domestic Violence

In Bound Volume 56, page WA 307, replace the answer to the question (AQW 1113/11) asked by Mr P Maskey with:

There was an error contained in my answer of 15 October 2010.

The answer stated that "Domestic violence can be perpetrated by both males and females but it is worth noting that the gender breakdown of domestic violence offenders under PBNI supervision is 91% male and 9% female".

The answer should have read "Domestic violence can be perpetrated by both males and females but it is worth noting that the gender breakdown of offenders under PBNI supervision is 91% male and 9% female". The distinction here is that my answer suggested that the percentages related to domestic violence perpetrators when in fact these percentages reflect all offenders under PBNI supervision.

The following additional information may be helpful;

- During 2009/10 ninety seven (97) male offenders were given an additional requirement to attend a Domestic Violence Programme as part of their court sentence. This represents 4% of all males who started supervision with PBNI.
- The current programme available targets male offenders who have committed acts of domestic abuse against female partners and does not cater for same sex relationships and/or where the perpetrator is female. In these instances the offender is worked with on an individual basis.

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