



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Mr Mark Durkan MLA, Minister of
the Environment

19 June 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)
Mrs Pam Cameron (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Alban Maginness
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Ian Milne
Lord Morrow
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Durkan	Minister of the Environment
Ms Helen Anderson	Department of the Environment
Mr Iain Greenway	Department of the Environment
Mr Paul Duffy	Driver and Vehicle Agency
Mr Mark Livingstone	Northern Ireland Environment Agency

The Chairperson: I welcome the Minister. Sorry for keeping you waiting for a little bit. I am delighted to see you and your team again today. I welcome Helen Anderson. Hello, Helen. Is Paul Duffy here? Yes. I also welcome Mark Livingstone and Iain Greenway, whom we know well.

Members, we have a number of issues. The used tyre action plan is very interesting and, in Tuesday's ministerial statement, you said that they are now looking at a scheme down South. Maybe you can talk us through that and how it will impact on us. You said in the statement that we are also looking to see whether there may be a corresponding scheme.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I am delighted to be here, as I always am when I come to have a chat with you and listen to the Environment Committee. Unfortunately, I do not have an awfully long time to spend here today. I had scheduled an hour and, although I was late getting in, I am unfortunately still scheduled to get away at 11.30 am.

As the Committee knows — we discussed it in the Chamber on Tuesday — from its previous work on tyres, there is a partial producer responsibility scheme in the South for the management of used tyres, and the Minister there has carried out a review of that scheme. The review has recommended a full producer responsibility scheme for tyres.

The Chairperson: In the long term.

Mr Durkan: Yes. His Department down South, which is the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, has since been engaging in a series of meetings with key stakeholders to firm up proposals for a new tyre scheme, and I have agreed with Minister Hogan that one of my officials will be part of that process and be an integral part of the tyres working group that has been set up to take the work forward. For a producer responsibility scheme to work in practice up here in the North, it will be necessary, however, to reach agreement on a complementary UK-wide scheme, and my officials are committed to pursuing that with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Scottish and Welsh Governments if the Irish proposals amount to a full producer responsibility scheme.

The Chairperson: How long will that take?

Mr Durkan: I recall from my conversations with Minister Hogan that he was keen for it to happen quickly, albeit when we say "quickly", it can, unfortunately, still take a couple of years. He is committed to driving it forward without delay, I am committed to playing our part in driving it forward without delay, and I would like to see it on the ground and operational as soon as possible, as I am sure Committee members will. However, it is a difficult one to work out and to progress. I have spoken about the need for us to be part of a complementary UK-wide scheme, and while the Scottish and Welsh Governments are making positive noises in that regard, the Westminster Government do not appear to be particularly warm on the issue.

The Chairperson: As I am sure you are aware, we carried out an inquiry into this. The Committee produced a report, and the long-term recommendation was for a strict producer responsibility scheme but, in the meantime, for a compliance scheme to register the collectors and how and where the used tyres are being processed. How is that scheme working in DOE?

Mr Durkan: I am certainly aware of the work done previously by the Committee on tyres. The Department has embraced that work, and it very much forms part of our used tyre action plan. I am happy to report that a number of operational, policy and legislative key actions in that used tyre action plan are being progressed and that several, fortunately and thankfully, have been completed. The Committee made 12 recommendations in its tyre disposal report. Several of those have been completed. For example, the electronic form for recording waste, the electronic duty of care (Edoc), has now been launched and end-of-waste forms and guidance are now accessible on the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) website.

A full review of waste exemptions is also under way, and I know that the need for that came up time and time again. I have also asked NIEA officials to produce a blunt, hard-hitting regulatory position statement to highlight the risks that tyres pose to the environment and, indeed, to human health. Those who collect, keep, treat and dispose of waste tyres must do so responsibly, and it is important — vital, in fact — that the Department that is responsible for the environment ensures that they do that, but we have to do so in partnership with other agencies.

My officials in the NIEA will continue to pursue waste offenders who are involved in the collection and illegal disposal of waste tyres.

The Chairperson: I will let other Members come in. Cathal, I am sure that you want to ask about enforcement.

Mr Boylan: No. Unfortunately, I missed the statement on Tuesday. I put my name down for a question, but it is not specifically on that subject.

The Chairperson: OK. What about enforcement? Do you have enough staff? During the inquiry, we were told about the lack of investigation and inspection.

Mr Durkan: Unfortunately, that is true right across the waste sector. However, steps have been taken and the complement of permanent and temporary staff has been increased. I am confident that we will see the results of that. We have had a wee bit of success in that regard. One prosecution has resulted from tyres being illegally disposed of on a bonfire, another operation resulted in the seizure of two lorries carrying tyres and other investigations are ongoing. As I said, that is just scratching the surface, but it is a start and it is important that we build on it.

The Chairperson: What do they do when they see bonfires stacked with tyres? Do they take them off?

Mr Durkan: I have been asking my officials about that since I took up this post 11 months ago. You could say that it has been a good year.

The Chairperson: The quick wit of the Minister as always.

Mr Durkan: Bonfires largely fall under councils' responsibility, and my agency certainly works closely with the councils in dealing with bonfires and cleaning up bonfires. However, the political controversy surrounding bonfires and the consternation that they cause local communities mean that councils are best placed to deal with them.

There is a fly-tipping protocol between the councils and the NIEA that most councils have signed up to. That requires councils to inform us about fly-tipping. That can be on a bonfire and, in more than one case, it has been. Council officials will have engaged with the community prior to that. My officials and the NIEA are not going out cold and lifting tyres off bonfires.

The Chairperson: They do not cause only environmental damage but can explode, which could be a health and safety issue with people standing around them.

Mr Durkan: Absolutely. I do not get bonfires at all, but I do respect the fact that some people in some communities insist on them and see them as marking their culture. That is their choice, but, if people are going to persist with bonfires, let us work to ensure that they do so in a safe manner for the environment and, more importantly, for their health and that of those around the bonfire.

The Chairperson: Absolutely. The next item that we are going to discuss with you, Minister, is taxis legislation. Obviously, this has been an ongoing issue, and you indicated that you would make either an oral or a written statement on the way forward for taxis legislation. Where are we with that?

Mr Durkan: Members of the Committee might be aware that I will issue a written statement to the Assembly this morning about how I intend to proceed with implementing taxi reform. It would obviously be helpful to the Committee if I share with it my plans and the reasons for them.

I will go into the details, but I must apologise to the Committee because an article on the plans has appeared in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that is based on my statement. That was not scheduled to have appeared in the 'Belfast Telegraph' until tomorrow, and it has caused me a degree of annoyance and my Department's press office a great deal of frustration and anger. I apologise to any members who have learned about that through the 'Belfast Telegraph'. I intended to do it procedurally correctly.

Taxis are a valuable and vital part of our economy. The majority of our taxis legalisation, however, dates back to the early 1980s. In fact, in Belfast, it goes back to by-laws that were devised in the 1950s. Quite simply, the problem is that that legislation is not up to the task of effectively regulating taxis in the 21st century. The Taxis Act 2008 was therefore enacted to raise the standard of taxi service, reduce illegal taxiing and improve compliance.

As you said, Madam Chair, there has been much debate about the need for these changes. After careful consideration though, I have decided that it is essential that we implement changes now to give full effect to the Act and to deliver improvements to the industry for the benefit of users and suppliers alike.

Key elements of the taxi reform programme are the arrangements for taxi vehicle licensing and the classes of taxis that will be recognised across Northern Ireland. I believe that the current dual-tier system that is in place in Belfast, with some taxis able to be hailed and others only available through booking, cannot adequately address a number of problems that the Act was designed to tackle. The public are confused about what taxis they can use in different circumstances, and there are insufficient numbers of taxis that can pick up on the street in Belfast, particularly at peak periods, to meet demand and ensure public order. The suspension of the regime for peak periods, which has been suggested, could be considered but would, in my opinion, create even further confusion for users. Furthermore, there is too much enforcement activity addressing relatively minor licensing offences. Members of the Committee may say that there is not enough enforcement anywhere, but that enforcement reduces the resources that are available to address the illegal and dangerous taxis out there.

I have listened to and considered the concerns that have been expressed that the change would adversely impact on Belfast public-hire taxi drivers. However, I have not been persuaded by those arguments. The changes that are proposed, I believe, will enhance the reputation of the taxi industry as a whole. The demand for the service of all taxis should be determined by the service that they provide and the price at which it is provided. I am convinced that any sector of the industry that provides a quality and price-competitive service will be able to thrive in the improved regulatory regime that the Taxis Act provides for. So, while I am aware of the concerns that have been raised by some in the industry and, indeed, some members of the Committee, I must balance those with the requirements that have been clearly set out by consumer and disability groups to improve regulation for a safe, fair and fit-for-purpose taxi industry.

Recently, I received explicit support for single-tier licensing from a number of groups. They include Disability Action, the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), the Consumer Council, Women's Aid, Victim Support, the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce, the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation, Pubs of Ulster, Visit Belfast and more. All those groups see the clear benefits to consumers, tourists and the industry itself. I also received 913 letters from Belfast private-hire taxi drivers in support of single-tier licensing, and that is in addition to the 4,200 postcards that the Committee received from private-hire taxi passengers of a similar mind.

Today, therefore, I am announcing that I intend to make taxi vehicle licensing regulations, introducing single-tier licensing in October this year with the provisions coming into force at the end of January 2015. Alongside that, I intend to commence the new powers of seizure regulations from January 2015. In advance of that, in October 2014, a new taxi driver test will be introduced for new taxi drivers only, and that will be followed in September 2015 with the start of the periodic training requirements for all taxi drivers.

In relation to taximeters and printers, I intend to make regulations before the end of the year with the requirements coming into force in September next year, which is two years later than had originally been intended.

Finally, I intend to make regulations for the new specification for wheelchair-accessible taxis in April 2015, with them coming into force in May 2015. Importantly, that new specification will ensure that users with disabilities will be better served by the taxi industry. I look forward to continuing to work with all the industry, the Committee and other consumer and disability groups in the coming months as we introduce the relevant legislation to deliver on the aims of the Act in relation to this vital industry.

The Chairperson: Minister, the three- or five-mile restriction zone specifically for Belfast has been discussed in Committee. What is your decision on that? Will you go ahead with that or not bother with it?

Mr Durkan: I would not say that I am not going to bother with it. It was not in the Taxis Act. In fact, many of the problems that single tier has been brought in to address would be compounded by going down that route, in my opinion. I know that that point has been raised by members of the Committee, and it has been raised in the Assembly and by people outside this Building. However, the vast majority of people I have spoken to and listened to are of the opinion that that would exacerbate the problems and the confusion that exists out there.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the Minister and thank him for his update, although I have to say that I am very disappointed, first, about the statement getting out and, secondly —

The Chairperson: I ask people to speak up a bit; the session is being recorded.

Mr Boylan: Secondly, for a number of months, we have tried to engage. You said that you look forward to working with the industry and the Committee. I and other members of the Committee have tried to work with you on this matter for the last 10 months. Before I get into the detail of some of the stuff that you mentioned, could you clearly outline the legislative process in relation to this? Members of the Committee agreed last year a way forward on single tier based on the premise that the Belfast issue would be addressed. So, you are well aware of that issue, Minister. Could you explain the legislative process to the Committee? From my point of view, and on behalf of the party, unfortunately, we will have to look at the legislative process again because we are not content with going forward with the introduction of single tier as you outlined.

Mr Durkan: OK. I wonder whether that was the case when the Committee voted for the SL1 to introduce single tier in June last year, which predated my appointment to the Ministry. I know that subsequent to that, Mr Boylan, other members of the Committee — indeed, the Committee as a whole — had expressed some concerns and that any subsequent SL1s relating to taxiing were shelved. The fact of the matter is that, since that SL1 was passed last June, the other subordinate legislation related to this does not need to come to Committee. I would very much like to ensure that it does. I want everyone to be on board to ensure that this is as successful as possible. It is necessary, and I understand 100% where Mr Boylan is coming from. However, I am not sure what solution he, any other member of the Committee, or anyone in the industry has been able to suggest that would be practical and possible.

Iain can go through the legislative process.

Mr Iain Greenway (Department of the Environment): Six statutory rules will have to be made through the normal negative resolution process. Some have had SL1s noted by the Committee. As the Minister said, the vehicle regulation SL1 was agreed by the Committee at a meeting in June last year. There is no change to the content of that SL1 and so, as far as the Department is concerned, it is still valid. The SL1 on taxi driver testing and training was noted and agreed by the Committee in, I think from memory, December last year. There are SL1s on meters, maximum fares and wheelchair-accessible vehicles to come forward to the Committee. The SL1 on the power of seizures has been approved by the Justice Committee because it is a matter in justice legislation. The statutory rules will be made and laid in the normal way.

The Chairperson: What other SL1s are to come to us?

Mr Greenway: Those on meters and maximum fares, which the Committee had asked to be put on hold until the Minister clarified the way forward on the single-tier issue, and there is one on wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

The Chairperson: OK. Will they be coming in October?

Mr Greenway: They will come after recess. The Committee is due to see the synopsis of the consultation and the proposed way forward on the SL1 on the wheelchair-accessible vehicles in this session, but, as the Minister says, by the letter of the standing order, the Committee does not have a right of veto on those SL1s. It has a right to see them, but the statutory rule making can proceed without approval of the SL1 by the scrutiny Committee.

Mr Weir: Can I clarify that point? The statutory rule is still to be brought in; is that correct?

Mr Greenway: The only statutory rules made under the Taxis Act to date are on taxi-operator licensing, which, as the Committee is aware is —

Mr Weir: Are there statutory rules to be brought in?

Mr Greenway: There are; I think I said six statutory rules.

Mr Weir: We talked about an SL1 earlier. Is there a statutory rule to be brought in in relation to single tier?

Mr Greenway: Correct. The taxi vehicle licensing regulations that the Minister announced this morning will be made in October 2014 and will come into effect —

Mr Weir: Under potentially negative resolution?

Mr Greenway: All the rules are subject to negative resolution. So, the Assembly has a place in that process.

Mr Weir: Yes, and it has a place in the process to potentially veto that.

Mr Greenway: Correct.

Mr Weir: It will be brought in in October. To some extent, that was partly the question, and I do not think that the answer was particularly clear. I do not know whether I interrupted you, Cathal.

Mr Boylan: No, it is grand. I wanted to leave other members to ask questions.

Mr Weir: Can I ask —

Mr Boylan: Just one second. I will finish off and then you can come back in.

Minister, I listened very carefully when you mentioned the Taxis Act addressing the issue of illegal taxis and confusion. It seems to me that, as far as the public are concerned, there is no confusion in the matter, but there were certainly illegal taxiing operations going on; there is no doubt about that. So, we are saying that the Act was introduced to stop illegal taxiing.

Iain Greenway is familiar with this, and that is why I am very disappointed. When we asked the Department to state how many members of an enforcement team are needed to address those issues, a certain number was given to us, but it seems to me that there was a serious lack of enforcement or a lack of legislation brought forward to address enforcement. At that point, taxis were doing whatever they wanted to do anyway. So, I am disappointed in what you are saying about this. I have to go back, Iain, on this. Iain was well aware of discussions that we had to bring something forward in terms of a three-mile or seven-mile zone, or whatever. There is no point in saying that the Committee did not bring something forward to try to address it. That is the disappointment.

Mr Durkan: Cathal, I certainly accept that suggestions were made, but I said that I do not think that any practical and doable suggestions were made. I also think that it is erroneous to say that there is no confusion among the wider public on this issue. That is certainly not what the numerous agencies who responded in support of single tier are saying. I will let Iain come in on the more technical aspects.

Mr Greenway: On the illegal taxis you mentioned, Cathal, one of the statutory rules being made is for powers of seizure. As I mentioned, the SL1 for that has been approved by the Justice Committee. The Minister is announcing this morning that that will be made and will be effective from the date of the making of the taxi vehicle licensing regulations. That will provide additional powers to police and enforcement officers to seize vehicles that are being used for illegal taxiing. We have also seen that operator licensing, which now has around 85% compliance and on which DVA enforcement staff are working to drive up still more, the operator is now a party to breaches of rules that, under the rest of the taxi legislation that the Minister mentioned from the 1980s and, indeed, the 1950s, operators did not have a place in that those covered only drivers and vehicles.

So, a very important part of the taxi legislation that has already been made is that operators can be held accountable for activities that breach regulations. The problem we have at the moment is that the bulk of these statutory rules have not yet been made, so the bulk of the Act has not been commenced and, therefore, the powers envisaged in the Act are not available. The Minister has announced this morning what he intends to do about that.

Mr Boylan: I have one final point, and I will then let everybody else in. Unfortunately, this has been a major issue for some of us who have been on this Committee for seven years. Minister, I accept that you are entitled to bring a written statement. You realise how important it was for this Committee, and we are where we are. You talked about price competitiveness. You could see this going down to two firms in this city running the whole thing, so I do not know how you can talk about price competitiveness. I am concerned that a number of jobs could be lost through this by people who have provided a service in this city for long and many a day and done so traditionally in this city. It is unfortunate that their views have not been taken on board this time. No doubt, come September or October, the Committee will have another view on this matter. Unfortunately, I do not think that it will go the way that we intended it to go in the first place.

Mr Durkan: Given that you have sat on this Committee for seven years, I can certainly understand how this might come as a disappointment to you. What I cannot understand is how it might come as a surprise. It is not something that I dreamt up last week. Certainly, no one around this table wants to see potential job losses. If an individual, a company, or people are providing a good service, they have nothing to fear from this legislation. If they continue to provide a service that is good and which is price-competitive, they should be able to thrive in the environment that this Act will create.

The Chairperson: Peter, I am aware of the time, and we have a number of other items that we want to talk to the Minister about. He has to leave at 11.30 am.

Mr Weir: With respect, Chair, I appreciate that. Given the importance of this issue and the fact that, as Cathal and others have said, this has been going on for years, I have to question why this is being done by way of a shoehorned session and a written statement as opposed to giving the full hour to the matter in an oral statement in the Chamber. I will not waste time by asking you a question on that, but it is a matter of high significance. I appreciate that the Minister has provided an explanation, but it is disappointing to see something leaked and put into the papers ahead of time.

On the issue of enforcement, a written statement has been put out, and we have not had the chance to read that yet. One of the other issues raised was whether there will be a specific dedicated enforcement team for Belfast.

Mr Durkan: Thank you for those questions, Mr Weir. Regarding the manner in which I have made this statement, I am not sure that a statement was required, be it written or oral. There is nothing new in this. It was meant to be introduced in September last year, so there is nothing new in it and no diversion from stated policy. The DVA, as you know, has primary responsibility for regulation of the taxi industry here. In this role, we are tasked with ensuring that all vehicles, operators and drivers comply with the industry legal requirements.

I know that issues have been raised in this Committee before, and rightly so, around enforcement and perceived — sometimes it is more than perceived — lack of enforcement. There had been a resourcing issue. We have managed to get more resources for enforcement, but there are still difficulties with enforcement. The introduction of a single tier will reduce the difficulties around enforcement. The enforcement section currently has two dedicated teams that are responsible for taxi and bus enforcement. The Belfast team comprises 14 enforcement officers, and there is one in Derry, or New Buildings comprising six enforcement officers. As regards a Belfast-dedicated team for enforcement, of the 14 enforcement officers based in Belfast, how much of their work is in Belfast, if not all of it?

Mr Paul Duffy (Driver and Vehicle Agency): As the Minister said, the two enforcement teams are split between Belfast and Derry, with 14 in Belfast. That is predominantly because most of the enforcement action takes place in Belfast. Whilst that team covers the other parts of Northern Ireland, it is predominantly focused on Belfast.

Mr Weir: With respect, then, the short answer to the question is that, no, there is not an additional specific dedicated Belfast team.

Mr Duffy: There is a Belfast-based team.

Mr Weir: Yes. Sorry, let us not play around with words. Is there a team dedicated to specifically dealing purely with the issues of taxi enforcement in Belfast?

Mr Duffy: Not purely Belfast.

Mr Weir: I am amazed. Maybe I should not be surprised, but I am disappointed in what has been said today and I think there are major problems. There will be an opportunity when the Committee deals with the statutory rule in relation to it. It has been highlighted in lights for the last number of months, with meetings before Christmas etc as to what was needed to try to bring it forward to at least have something that everybody could live with. It appears that that has been rejected. Can you name a single change that has been made to meet the concerns of those who have raised concerns in Belfast?

Mr Durkan: A lot of the suggestions that have been put forward that might go some way to allaying the concerns of those based in Belfast around the legislation actually lie outwith the remit of my Department, on issues such as ranks, access to bus lanes and so forth. My Department and officials have certainly liaised intensively with counterparts in DRD on the issue and, indeed, facilitated meetings between members of —

Mr Weir: Obviously, we do not have the statement in front of us. Can you name a single action that the Department has taken, or changes that the Department has made, to meet the concerns?

Mr Greenway: Yes, we can.

Mr Weir: Which are?

Mr Greenway: Within the wheelchair-accessible vehicle regulations — and I recognise that the Committee has yet to see the synopsis of the consultation — there will be grandfather rights for existing public-hire wheelchair-accessible vehicles for five years from the date of introduction of the new regulations. That has not been supported by the disability groups, who have said that if there is a new, improved specification that better meets the needs of disabled passengers, it should be in immediately. However, in response to representations from public-hire drivers about the investment needed to upgrade the fleet and so on, the proposed way forward will have a five-year grandfather rights period for all existing Belfast public-hire drivers.

Mr Weir: So, the people delivering already are getting grandfather rights in that regard. That presumably gives a bit of time for people to catch up.

Mr Greenway: With respect, some of the vehicles they currently have will not meet the requirements of disabled passengers. The Department is proposing to give a five-year transition period.

Mr Weir: Presumably, they will then be competing with a lot of taxis that have no disability access at all.

Mr Greenway: No. Again, with respect, they will not. They will be different classes of taxi. There will be class A and class B taxis. Class B will be wheelchair accessible. Only those taxis, by law, will be able to advertise themselves as such. We have recommended to the DRD, or the Minister has indicated to Minister Kennedy, that only class B taxis will be able to access ranks and bus lanes. As the Minister said, that is a DRD decision.

Mr Weir: So, we could have two classes of taxis with some operating ranks and some not, yet you cannot have a two-tier system in the centre of Belfast.

Mr Greenway: For the reasons that the Minister has explained.

Mr Weir: All right; OK.

The Chairperson: We have talked about that before and always knew that taxis with disability access could go into the ranks. That has been mentioned a few times.

Mr Weir: In many ways, the point is that we can have some level of differentiation. I have no problem with that differentiation, but it would be far too confusing and would be completely impossible to have any other form of differentiation anywhere in Belfast.

I am not surprised, but I am disappointed that the Department has chosen to go on what I think is a collision course on the issue. I urge you, even at this late stage, to hold back and find something that can get people on board before you introduce it in October.

There is not any degree of coming together on this. It is not just the public hire taxis. The private hire companies outside the two largest firms — those in the taxi association with hundreds of drivers — have indicated that they do not believe that a single-tier system will work well in Belfast. It is not simply the public hire taxis. I do not know whether you have met them to discuss that side of things.

It is about trying to find a way through that everybody can live with. This is not a solution that can do that in any way.

Mr Durkan: I have met representatives from a number of taxi companies and the vast majority of them were supportive of the move.

Mr Weir: I have met representatives of companies that represent hundreds of drivers and the private hire association that deal with all four parts of the city. They have indicated that they have other concerns with enforcement and feel that the Department has not been strong enough in tackling a lot of illegal activity. They also have the same position as the Belfast public hire taxis that a single tier will

not work well for Belfast and will create a situation in which there will be a danger of a duopoly developing in Belfast. That will not be good for consumers in the long run. People do not necessarily understand it. It will not be good for consumers or the taxi industry as a whole unless there are changes.

We cannot make it any clearer that you are running into a major problem in October.

The Chairperson: I am aware of the Minister's time. Two other members want to come in. Tom, quickly.

Mr Elliott: Very quickly, Chair, as this is by and large a Belfast issue. It has been about for a very long time. I am just reading the minutes of the 2007 report of the Bill.

My question is about enforcement. Whatever system you have in place you will need a proper enforcement system and that has not been operating so far. I am not convinced by the answers to both questions about enforcement. What extra measures will be put in place for enforcement in whatever system we implement?

Mr Duffy: As the Minister said, we have recruited additional staff. We are also starting to have much more and better intelligence and are able to target our resources more towards illegal taxis. The introduction of a single-tier system would mean that we would not have to enforce the issue of taxis picking up people illegally, particularly in Belfast. That will free up additional resources to target those more serious road traffic offences.

Mr Elliott: Does that mean more resources?

Mr Duffy: Yes. We have recruited additional staff. We have more resources and are targeting those resources in a much more intelligent way through the gathering of intelligence.

The Chairperson: In specific areas?

Mr Duffy: Yes.

Mr Elliott: All my other points have been covered, Chair. I will not go over them again.

The Chairperson: Can you take one more question, Minister? Lord Morrow.

Mr Durkan: No. *[Laughter.]*

Lord Morrow: Chair, I do not think that any Committee member can sit here and be content with what we have heard. This is nothing short of a debacle. The Minister has come here, put out a prior statement to the media before he came to the Committee and said that he will announce the changes through a written statement to the House. I would have expected more from him. That is just not acceptable. The mandarins in the Department have taken over and said that they will show the Minister how to deal with the Committee. I think that we have picked up the contempt with which we have been treated, and I do not think that it augurs well for the future.

I serve notice on the Minister that he has not heard the last of this by a long shot. Your departmental officials may feel that this is the way to deal with things, but I think that you are going to find out that it is not. This matter is not over by a long shot. The way that you have allowed your officials to control you on the issue and to take over will not go unnoticed among rank-and-file MLAs and the public at large. It is totally unacceptable.

I know that we are out of time. I feel like going on for another hour. I will not do that, but I am just serving notice on the Minister that he has not heard the last of it.

Mr Durkan: I thank Lord Morrow for the question — well, the warning. For the record, the decision to proceed in this manner was 100% my decision —

Lord Morrow: That makes it worse.

Mr Durkan: I apologised to the Committee and reiterate the apology about how that issue appeared in the press. It is something that my press team has taken great exception to and great umbrage at with the 'Belfast Telegraph' and I apologise to the Committee for that. However, the decision to proceed in that manner was 100% mine.

Lord Morrow: That makes it worse.

The Chairperson: I did not realise that you were outside from 10.30 am. I am sorry; we were not told. I am very sorry to have kept you for 15 minutes.

Mr Durkan: That is OK. I am sorry that we had such a short time, as I know that there are other important issues that members would have liked to have raised. I would like to let members and the Chair know that we do not need the formal setting of a Committee meeting to discuss those issues and, even over the recess period, I would be delighted to meet the Chair and Committee members if they have specific area of interest they would like to discuss.

The Chairperson: I will consult other members, and we may take that up. Check your diary on your holidays. Thank you very much, Minister, and the members of your team.