

# Official Report (Hansard)

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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.  
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: [simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 5 March 2013

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Executive Committee Business

### Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I beg to move

*That the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA 16/11-15] do now pass.*

I would like to record my sincere thanks to the Chair, Deputy Chair and members of the Committee for Regional Development for their timely and effective scrutiny of this important Bill. I am grateful for the wide support shown for the measure, which is required to make good my party's commitment and the Executive's commitment to hard-pressed families that no additional water charges will be introduced during this Assembly.

As Members are now well aware, the Bill will also make a further technical amendment to the Land Registration Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 to require certain notifications in respect of the laying of pipes and sewers to be registered as statutory charges. Without further ado, the important Bill before us is a necessary and sensible measure. It eases pressure on families. It strikes the right balance at a difficult time, and I am pleased to commend it to the Assembly.

**Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Labhraím inniu mar LeasChathaoirleach an Choiste Forbartha Réigiúnaí le tacaíocht a thabhairt don Bhille Seirbhísí Uisce agus Séarachais. I speak today as the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Regional Development to voice the Committee's support for the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill.

The Committee received the Bill into Committee Stage on completion of the Second Stage on 27

November 2012. The Committee invited written and oral evidence from stakeholders, all of which supported the delivery of the Programme for Government priority 2 commitment. There were, however, some concerns with regard to the current governance structure in NIW and in respect of the wider consultation on the options paper that the Minister had provided for his Executive colleagues and which is being considered by the Budget scrutiny committee. With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will briefly address those concerns.

As Members are aware, NIW was established as a government-owned company in 2006. It is a statutory trading body owned by central government but operating under company legislation with substantial independence from government. However, following the Executive's decision to defer the introduction of direct domestic water charges, it was designated as a non-departmental public body (NDPB) for public expenditure purposes in March 2009. That designation requires NIW to manage its regulatory funding requirements within public expenditure funding constraints. It was accepted by all those who provided evidence to the Committee that that was not the best governance model. Indeed, the Utility Regulator described it as suboptimal in the price control 13 (PC13) draft determination. Others suggested that it was bureaucratic, did not encourage or allow long-term strategic planning and investment, and removed the incentive to deliver greater efficiencies, as were evident in similar utility providers in England, Scotland and Wales.

The Committee has previously expressed concerns about the governance structure in NI Water. As stated, we are aware that the Minister has submitted an options paper to the Executive for their consideration. The Committee has written to the Minister asking for sight of that, and we are encouraged that the Minister has indicated that it will be forthcoming at the earliest convenience. However, the Committee recommends that the Minister, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, urgently enter into negotiations with the British

Treasury to seek an appropriate designation for NI Water that will remove the negative aspects of the current structure, such as the absence of end-year flexibility, while retaining a high level of accountability to the Department and the Assembly.

I turn now to the issue of wider consultation on the future funding of NIW. While the Bill clearly honours the PFG commitment to no additional domestic charges in this parliamentary mandate, it extends that commitment into the next mandate. From a strategic, regulatory and operational perspective, that has raised concerns among organisations that provided evidence to the Committee. Among other responsibilities, the Utility Regulator sets the level of expenditure for NIW through the price control mechanism, the current determination having been published in December 2012. That determination — PC13 — will run for the period 2013-15 and is based very much on the PFG commitment that the Bill now puts in place.

The next determination will run from 2015 to 2021 and will include one year of direct subsidy, but the remaining period could be one where direct additional domestic charges are applied. Lowering the direct subsidy to NIW below 50% would allow for a reclassification away from that of an NDPB and allow it, for example, to access low-cost investment from banks. That will have a direct impact on the investment and incentivisation available to NIW.

The Committee received a presentation last week from the managing director of Welsh Water and was impressed by the ability of his organisation to raise funds to invest in the utility while keeping operational costs at a low level and reducing the amount charged to customers. The Committee intends taking up an invitation from Welsh Water to visit it, and, on behalf of the Committee, I extend the invitation to the Minister and his officials to accompany us.

NIW has also indicated that, if there were a change to the current Executive policy away from no additional domestic charges, it would require approximately 18 months' restructuring to get to a position where it could effectively and efficiently commence hard charging. The Committee, again mindful that the Executive are considering the options paper, recommends that the debate and consultation on the future structure of NIW is commenced as early in the process as possible to allow informed decisions to be made and to allow for the development and scrutiny of appropriate Executive and departmental policies. Obviously, the

Committee will wish to have a central role in that consultation.

The Committee is supportive of the Bill. It delivers against the Programme for Government priority 2 commitment.

**Mr Easton:** I welcome and fully support the Final Stage of the Bill, and I congratulate the Minister on steering it through.

I intend to be very brief. I welcome the minor technicality that allows water and sewerage undertakers to record their intention to carry out certain works on private land on the statutory charge register, which is held by the Land Registry. That will allow potential buyers of land to be informed if the land is affected by certain statutory restrictions. That is worthwhile to help protect people when purchasing land.

I also welcome the fact that there will be no water charges over the next three-year period until 2016, when we will have another look at it. Although that move will cost the Assembly £282 million in subsidies, I feel that, when weighed against the potential suffering of those who can least afford it, the benefits outweigh the costs.

**Mr Dallat:** As a member of the Regional Development Committee, I, too, support the Final Stage of the Bill. I want to record my thanks to the Clerk and to the other members of the Committee for the teamwork that was demonstrated during the discussion.

I certainly, if you will pardon the pun, do not wish to pour cold water on the Bill in any way, but it is a temporary arrangement that does not face up to the fact that we have an industry that is badly in need of reform. Historically, the industry suffered from underinvestment, particularly during the dark days of the Troubles, when money was diverted to other needs. Of course, in more recent times, the industry has featured in the public eye for all the wrong reasons.

Returning to the Bill, in the longer term, there has to be greater accountability and continuous reinvestment so that we provide the highest quality of water and protect the environment with the best means of dealing with sewage disposal. Most importantly, we need to avoid infraction of European regulations that will increasingly come into being. We certainly do not wish to stack up difficulties for a future generation of the Assembly — speaking positively, of course, and assuming that there will be one.

Nailing our colours to the mast — if it is all right to use that term — the SDLP believes that a mutual society is the best option. The Deputy Chairperson referred to the Welsh model when we had someone addressing us last week, which came pretty close to that model. We particularly like that because it would give ordinary people a real say in the running of the water service. It would mean that it would be accountable, and, without wishing to stray too far away, let us say that the co-operative model is experiencing growth at the moment, creating jobs and giving real ownership back to ordinary people. It would be an awful pity to miss opportunities such as that, and I am sure that the Minister will give thought to that. Certainly, we do not want to move towards privatisation — I do not think that anybody in the Assembly particularly wants that — but the Bill cannot be seen simply as a "get me out of jail" ticket to avoid hard decisions in the future.

I finish by saying that supporting mutuality as a concept for the future does not necessarily mean direct water charges. It simply means that you have a mechanism that gives people a real say in the future of what I think is the most important industry, not only to private people but to commercial enterprises that pay for their water and are experiencing great difficulty in meeting those Bills. On that note, I welcome the Bill, I welcome the co-operation of the Minister in the discussions that we have had. I hope that we will continue to work hard to achieve a model that will be perfect for Northern Ireland and perfect for its people.

**10.45 am**

**Mr Swann:** On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I support the Final Stage of the Bill. I am speaking in place of my colleague Ross Hussey, my party's representative on the Regional Development Committee. Regrettably, he is unable to attend today due to other important business.

It is an important debate because it honours a clear manifesto commitment that we in the Ulster Unionist Party gave at the last election. It is an important debate because it reassures hard-working families that they will not have to worry about separate or additional water charging during this Assembly term. People across Northern Ireland who are worried about their heating bills, fuel bills, the rising cost of food and essentials and even about making their rent or mortgage payments can be reassured that they will not have to worry again about separate or additional water charging bills during this Assembly term. In the current difficult economic climate, working families have

enough to worry about with Minister McCausland's Welfare Reform Bill, if it is passed unamended, but they will not have to worry about water bills.

I pay tribute to the Minister, my party colleague Danny Kennedy, for securing full Executive support for this measure in the Programme for Government, which was, ultimately, voted for all parties and supported by all parties. Even the Alliance Party, which in its manifesto said that it intended to put more pressure on households and saddling working families with another bill, seemed to have little issue in the end supporting this Bill. That is a bit like their friends, the Lib Dems, who campaigned on tuition fees, only to do a U-turn when they got a whiff of government. Of course, there are those who currently pay water charges: our families, our farmers and our businesses. They too feel the pressure of price rises in electricity and gas. They are enterprises that provide important sources of employment, and they need some good news too.

There are challenges about the future governance of water in Northern Ireland and the direction that things may take during the lifetime of the next Assembly. This significant Bill gives time and space for parties to work together to build some form of consensus on the much long-term way forward. Pause for thought on where Northern Ireland Water was just over two years ago. We had the big freeze and a genuine and serious water crisis. Who could forget the events that ruined Christmas and the new year period for so many? Only a few months later, the current Minister took over, and we have witnessed what a steadying influence he has been on the water service. We are all aware of the continually improving statistics and improving levels of service. The Bill is consistent in that drive for stability, certainty and the provision of foundations on which to explore long-term options and governance models.

It is sometimes said that good things come in small packages, and I do not disagree with that. This Bill demonstrates that, in legislation, a short Bill can go a long way in improving the lot for households right across Northern Ireland. For that reason, the Ulster Unionist Party fully supports the Bill.

**Mr Dickson:** I support the Bill in its Final Stage. Despite my reservations, I respect the fact that the Assembly and the Executive have agreed a Programme for Government that rules out the introduction of domestic water charges through to April 2015. I am sure that the Ulster Unionists will also respect that Programme for

Government and this Assembly when it comes to the Welfare Reform Bill.

Throughout the legislative process, I have stressed the need to reconsider the post-2015 period and questioned the wisdom of extending the subsidy as far as 2016. However, as time dragged on, it became clear that, even if we were able to agree on alternative arrangements, Northern Ireland Water would not have enough time to implement them before the end of the mandate. This legislation, quite frankly, was introduced far too late for us to do anything about the governance and financial difficulties faced by Northern Ireland Water. It is regrettable and shameful that no consideration was given to those issues, even in parallel with the legislative process. It is disgraceful that the Regional Development Committee and the Assembly have been asked to consider and approve a Bill with absolutely no idea of what the Minister has planned for the future of Northern Ireland Water. We are signing off on hundreds of millions of pounds of expenditure without any meaningful debate or discussion about the future of our water system. We have to pass the Bill today because we have no alternative, as successive Ministers have failed to face up to the reality that the current arrangements are unsustainable. This legislation is another sticking plaster, put on with no idea how we are going to heal the wound.

The Committee has at least tried to get the discussion under way, as others have said. Indeed, last week, we heard from Welsh Water, which operates a model similar to that which the Alliance Party has been advocating for years. Most importantly, its chief executive, Nigel Annett, stressed the importance of a revenue stream independent of government that provides security and, crucially for our water system, allows for long-term planning. Importantly, charging at Welsh Water is linked to the social security system in order to identify households that require discounts. That contrasts sharply with the arrangements here in Northern Ireland, which subsidise the cost of water to the richest in our society while diverting hundreds of millions of pounds away from the public services on which the most vulnerable depend.

As I have said time and again, charging is necessary, but we need to make sure that any charging arrangements are not only fair but transparent and designed to protect the most vulnerable people. Those are issues which we need to consider urgently. We cannot afford any more sticking plasters. Minister, we need to start that discussion now; not in three

months, six months or a year's time. We need it now. So I urge you and your Department to engage immediately with the Committee and the Assembly to find a fair and sustainable solution for the people of Northern Ireland.

Perhaps, when the Finance Minister, during the Budget debate, described my call for charging as brave, that signalled the entry of realism into the debate that needs to start now.

**Mr Spratt:** I apologise to the House and to the Minister for not being here at start of the debate. I had a medical appointment this morning.

I want to be brief in what I have to say as Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee. We have debated the Bill fully, as the Minister and the Department know, and I appreciate the co-operation of the members, the Committee Clerk and the officials of the Committee in relation to that.

I thank the Deputy Chairperson for presenting the Committee's view, and I just want to reiterate couple of points made by him. There was consensus in the Committee on the presentation given by Welsh Water. I know that there has been further debate outside my Committee on the same presentation, which was given to another Assembly Committee on the same day. There is merit in looking at that model and examining it for the future. I reiterate the Deputy Chair's invitation to the Minister and some officials from the Department. We had a worthwhile trip in relation to rapid transit, and this is another area in which some good ideas could be created. It merits examination.

Let me also say briefly, with regard to Mr Swann's remarks on giving time and space to parties in relation to the Bill, that the vast majority of members of the Committee want time and space and believe that there should now be an examination of this whole area, not a rushed process but one that will take some time to see what is best for the Executive and, indeed, more importantly, the people of Northern Ireland. He mentioned where Northern Ireland Water had been a couple of years ago. In the week that the present chief executive has announced that he will retire from Northern Ireland Water in August, it is important to put on record his very valuable contribution over the past two or three years in bringing Northern Ireland Water back to being some sort of a well-respected organisation. He has done a lot to address the problems that existed with staffing and all of that in the organisation. So,



we need to pay tribute to him and the work that he has done.

Finally, I thank the DRD officials for their help during the entire process. It was a short Bill. Short is good, some people say, but it was well worth it, and we had a good and worthwhile debate in Committee. I have no hesitation in supporting the views of my Committee on the Bill.

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank all Members who contributed to today's debate. I am pleased at the widespread support given by Members to the Bill.

The Bill makes good our commitment not to introduce additional household water charges during the current mandate. It does not and should not seek to address longer-term policy issues about how water and sewerage services should be governed in Northern Ireland. It is right that those questions are of interest to the Assembly and are the subject of much debate, but they are beyond the scope of the Bill. The current legislation that enables a subsidy to be paid to NI Water on behalf of customers will expire on 31 March this year. If the Executive's decision not to introduce additional water charges is to be implemented, it is essential that the legislation progresses.

Looking forward long term, the Executive have agreed with my recommendation that funding and governance arrangements for water and sewerage services should be remitted to the Budget review group. Many of the issues are cross-cutting, and this is a sensible approach designed to ensure mature debate.

I note the Committee's recommendation on discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury, which was outlined by the Deputy Chair. However, as an example of the cross-cutting nature of the area, it would be the Finance Minister who would engage Her Majesty's Treasury for discussion, not me as Minister for Regional Development. However, again, that would have to be done on the basis of consensus.

I want to encourage engagement, I want to help build consensus, and I want to work to address the acknowledged shortcomings of the current arrangements. NI Water's ongoing dual status as a non-departmental public body and a government-owned company is not a permanent solution, because it is not sustainable in the long term. I am conscious that we need to continue to take stock and to bear in mind the fact that we have provided stability to NI Water. I join the Committee Chairman in his comments in respect of the

chief executive of NI Water, Trevor Haslett, who has provided considerable stability to NI Water. We can all remember where we were three winters ago with the freeze/thaw.

We now need to work together and take a measured look at the long-term issues and apply our minds collectively to developing a range of potential solutions. In the interim, I have urged stakeholders in the water sector to make the current arrangements work as well as they can. That has been a backdrop to NI Water delivering on efficiency targets, producing the highest levels of drinking water quality and waste water treatment and improving customer service. I commend the company for those achievements under arrangements that are short of ideal.

#### 11.00 am

I will quickly address some points that were raised by Members. The Deputy Chair welcomed the Bill. Appropriate scrutiny was given to the Bill. Like him, I welcome the PC13 and the outcome that we have been able to achieve there. That gives further stability to the position of NI Water.

The Deputy Chair and, indeed, the Chairman of the Committee, in his later contribution, raised the issue of the invitation to me to accompany the Committee and officials with my departmental officials to Wales to see at first hand that operation. I can confirm that, approximately a year ago, I had discussions with the chief executive of Welsh Water. I am aware of that as an option. It is one option. I hesitate to accept the invite at this point because I would like to have at least preliminary discussions with the Budget review group in advance of sampling other models. There are other models out there, but I will carefully consider the invitation that has been provided.

Mr Easton supported the Bill, and I am grateful for that. I largely agree with Mr Dallat's comments: we have to maintain the quality of our water. He indicated his solution based on mutuality and not privatisation, but he indicated a desire that we work together. Again, I welcome that. Robin Swann made a significant contribution in which he was very generous to me, as I would expect. In trying to show an attractive modesty, I can honestly say that what he said was absolutely correct.

Mr Dickson supported the Bill despite his reservations. I take the point about a sticking plaster etc. It is not a sticking plaster. I remind the Member that this will be an Executive decision as we move forward. This will create

the opportunity in the Budget review group to carry forward consideration of all the issues. The issues are not without their challenges, so I hope that, through the Budget review group initially and the Regional Development Committee and the Assembly, we can make progress on all these matters.

I welcome Mr Spratt to his position again. I thank him for the contribution that he made and for his broad support for the Bill. As Members are aware, the Budget review group's considerations are at a very early stage. I will be glad to report to the Assembly on any proposals that we agree, but, as I have said, that is for another debate.

Today, we have the opportunity to move forward on this Bill, which implements agreed Executive policy, and I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA 16/11-15] do now pass.*

## Criminal Justice Bill: Further Consideration Stage

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Members will be aware that the Minister of Justice has advised in correspondence to Members that he is not in a position to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Criminal Justice Bill today. However, as it stands on the Order Paper, the item of business must be formally disposed of.

**Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice):** I regret that Executive clearance has not been given to amendments that I intended to propose, and, therefore, the stage is not moved.

*Not moved.*

**Mr Allister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The item has not been moved, and, that being the case, the next item of business is Question Time. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2:00 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 11.05 am.*

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 2, 5, 7 and 9 have been withdrawn, and questions 2, 5 and 9 require written answers.

#### Sexual Orientation Strategy

1. **Mr Brady** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the sexual orientation strategy. (AQO 3545/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson (The First Minister):** Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer the question.

**Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** We remain committed to publishing a sexual orientation strategy. A consultation document that will inform public consultation on the strategy, is currently under consideration in the Department. A sexual orientation strategy will be published once the consultation process has been completed. Our officials continue to engage with the sector on a regular basis to update it on the development of the consultation document.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the junior Minister for his answer. Will he explain what is holding the strategy back, considering that the First Minister told the Chamber three times in the past year that the final strategy would be completed and published by the end of 2012? Will he comment on reports from the LGBT sector that his party — the DUP — has been dragging its feet —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member come to his question?

**Mr Brady:** — on the publication of a credible sexual orientation strategy for a number of years and is hostile to the sector receiving equality of treatment?

**Mr Bell:** I can address that in reverse order. The Member read his question very well, but I am not hostile to any human being. I believe that all human beings, regardless of the colour

of their skin, their age, their sex, their sexual orientation or their political persuasion, should be treated with the innate dignity that comes with human rights and human worth.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) remains committed to publishing a sexual orientation strategy. Junior Ministers and OFMDFM officials continue to engage with the sector and with members of the forum.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Mike Nesbitt, I remind Members that, as far as possible, they should not be seen reading out supplementary questions.

**Mr Nesbitt:** What was I going to say? [*Laughter.*] I thank the Minister for his answers to date. He said twice that officials were engaging with the sector. Does he agree with the Rainbow Project, which believes that setting up a consultative group to advise on drafting is the way forward?

**Mr Bell:** We engage with the strategy that we have. I have met members of the sector, including the group that has been represented, and we will continue to engage, take their views and seek agreement so that we could have a coherent strategy to go forward.

**Mr Craig:** Will the Minister confirm that any sexual orientation strategy will not create additional rights but merely be a reiteration of all existing rights?

**Mr Bell:** Yes, I think that I can. I have said constantly in the House that we believe in the innate dignity and human worth of every human being. I will restate what I have said to the Member previously: I do not think that we would be in a position to support any new or additional rights or responsibilities.

**Mr Eastwood:** We have been talking about a strategy that is long overdue. Another commitment is long overdue — 15 years overdue, I think — and that is the bill of rights for Northern Ireland. Can I ask —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. That was a good try, but the Member will know, as he is long enough in the Chamber, that the question must relate, as far as possible, to the original question.

**Mr McCarthy:** The junior Minister will have seen the frustration in the Chamber about the delay on this issue. Will he give the Assembly

a firm commitment on a date on which the strategy will be published?

**Mr Bell:** We will continue to seek agreement on a coherent strategy to take forward. In the meantime, we have spoken out constantly against any form of abuse against anybody's values, orientation or skin colour. We will continue to reaffirm the innate dignity and worth of every human being.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 2 has been withdrawn.

## Delivering Social Change Signature Programmes

3. **Mr Weir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Delivering Social Change signature projects. (AQO 3547/11-15)

4. **Mr McClarty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of the six signature programmes under the Delivering Social Change framework announced in October 2012. (AQO 3548/11-15)

11. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the key signature projects announced in October 2012. (AQO 3555/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson:** Mr Speaker, with your permission, I would like to take questions 3, 4 and 11 together.

On 10 October 2012, the deputy First Minister and I announced six significant signature programmes to the value of £26 million under the Delivering Social Change framework. The programmes are designed to tackle multigenerational poverty and to improve children's health and well-being, and educational and life opportunities. Work on the implementation of the programmes is ongoing. In January 2013, our officials met each of the senior officials tasked by the relevant Minister to deliver progress and expedite delivery. Further discussions with key officials in the lead Departments also took place last month. Close discussions are continuing to ensure delivery at the earliest opportunity.

I am confident that, for the most part, work on all the signature programmes is progressing as quickly and efficiently as is possible to ensure effective delivery. The Delivering Social Change framework aims to change the way in which Departments have traditionally worked. We want to ensure that Departments work in an

effective, joined-up way. The new approach is challenging to some Departments and officials. Criticism has been levelled at the Department of Education about the time taken to deliver the numeracy and literacy scheme. We have spoken to the Minister of Education and officials and have made it clear that we want the teachers recruited prior to the summer and ready well in advance of the new academic year.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the First Minister for his response. He referred to the signature project and the employment of 230 teachers. As there seems to be uncertainty from the Department of Education about when those teachers will be employed and it is unclear how they will be employed, will the First Minister bring clarity on those two subjects? How and when will the additional teachers be employed?

**Mr P Robinson:** I hope that the "when" will be as I have stated and the teachers will be employed well in advance of September. Needless to say, it would have been much better from our point of view had it been possible to do that earlier. We recognise that what we do with Delivering Social Change will add a feature to what the Department already does. Therefore, there is added value with the programme as we have set it out. The deputy First Minister and I made it fairly clear in our announcement that we would like to see the scheme going forward through one-to-one tutoring on the basis that presently unemployed teachers would take up those posts and, indeed, that they should be assigned to pupils, as opposed to schools. We fear that, if they were assigned to schools, they might be taken up with the work of the schools as opposed to concentrating specifically on the young people who are lagging behind.

That is the scheme as we outlined it. It was endorsed unanimously by the Executive. Of course, it will be taken forward by the Department of Education. Obviously, we have to fit in to whatever employment law requires us to do, so there are issues about that that we have to look at. The Department will raise issues, none of which, in my view, is so difficult to overcome that we should not be able to meet the kind of timetable that I have now set out.

**Mr McClarty:** I thank the First Minister for his responses so far. How do the First Minister and deputy First Minister plan to work with the Minister of Education to address the findings of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report that an unacceptable number of young people leave

school having failed to attain minimal levels of literacy and numeracy?

**Mr P Robinson:** The very reason that we brought forward our Delivering Social Change programme is that we recognise that there has been multigenerational disadvantage in many fields, not just in education. Whether it is in health and well-being — in some cases, how long you will live is determined on the basis of your postal code — or in educational achievement, which is determined by the level of disadvantage in the area that you come from, we believe that there should be a policy in place that addresses those issues. Each Department has programmes going forward to address those issues. What we are saying is that we do not believe that what is presently happening is all the answer, and we are putting in place a programme that gives additional value and attempts to address the very issue that the Member has outlined.

Sending 230 teachers into schools to see pupils who have fallen behind and are lagging behind as they approach exams is an excellent way of trying to lift people up and give them a better opportunity to make sure that they meet the necessary standards. I have much confidence in the education system in Northern Ireland, but parts of it are failing. We should concentrate on the parts that are failing rather than trying to change the parts that have been successful.

**Mr McAleer:** Will the Minister tell us how many of the 10 additional family support hubs have been established with the £3 million that was allocated to signature projects last October?

**Mr P Robinson:** All the lead Departments have been asked to bring forward their schemes for each of the issues. Whether it is the 10 family support hubs, the parenting support groups, the incubation hubs or some of the other measures that were contained in that statement, each of the Ministers will bring forward their proposals for how we move forward.

The family hubs are intended to deal with probably about 3,000 children. It is important that that scheme is put in place and that we have the best possible mechanisms to ensure that we get real value. As well as the family hubs, we, of course, have the proposals to deal with assistance for parenting. All that shows the joined-up nature of Delivering Social Change, as it deals with families, parenting skills and primary and secondary education in fitting pupils for the future, on into improvement in skills and into the local areas, where we have

incubation units to try to improve the opportunity for employment in those areas.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the First Minister provide an update on the social economy hubs? Will they be in situ before the end of the mandate, and are the local councils buying into them?

**Mr P Robinson:** There is a difficulty — I hope that it simply slows down progress rather than making it impossible — and it centres on the issue of attracting people to give us two-year leases for these kinds of proposals. I discussed this recently with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and suggested that it might be worth taking forward the proposition that, where there is not a lease, support should be given to landlords to improve their properties along the lines of an agreement to meet the criteria set out in our statement. If it is difficult for people to find a way forward on the basis of getting two-year leases for a significant number of properties, there are other mechanisms that we should try.

**Mrs Cochrane:** What consideration has been given to extending the remit of additional teachers for numeracy and literacy to include basic computing skills, as that could further build on the efforts to ensure that young people are equipped for emerging sectors?

**Mr P Robinson:** We can look at that, but the basic requirements are for numeracy and literacy. Do not forget that what we propose is additional to what is presently on offer, and there are considerable opportunities in IT skills with the present curriculum. So, there are opportunities at present that should be fully taken up. Indeed, outside the education system itself, there are further IT opportunities in many community organisations. So, I am happy to see how we succeed in improving the levels of numeracy and literacy under the pilot that we are operating and whether we can extend that further for young people. Do not forget that this is only one element of it. It is not just about young people who are disadvantaged. Therefore, the Delivering Social Change policy goes beyond that. Perhaps there are more relevant purposes for making IT skills available beyond the education age to those in later life. We can consider that when we look at the next tranche of Delivering Social Change.

**2.15 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** Question 4 has been answered, and question 5 has been withdrawn.

## EU Competitive Funding

**6. Mr G Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Programme for Government commitment to a 20% increase in EU competitive funding drawdown in this comprehensive spending review period. (AQO 3550/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson:** We continue to make good progress towards meeting the 20% target over the four-year Budget period. In 2011-12, which was year 1, we drew down some £15.8 million. We hope to secure an additional £13.5 million of funding this year. On the basis of the baseline calculated over a year ago, we would have been ahead of our target at this time. However, following late notification of drawdown by the Department of Education, we have initiated a mid-term revalidation of the figures supplied by all Departments, taking the opportunity to ensure that they are robust and comprehensive. Although that exercise is ongoing and definitive figures are not yet available, we anticipate that the 2010-11 baseline and hence the amount of additional funding to be delivered under the target will increase. The 20% target will, however, stand, and progress against the more challenging commitment will continue to be monitored and validated by the Programme for Government central team and the delivery oversight group chaired by the head of the Civil Service.

**Mr G Robinson:** How will the additional drawdown notified late by the Department of Education impact on the 20% target under the Programme for Government?

**Mr P Robinson:** That might be a bit complex, to the extent that there are more issues than just the Department of Education's late notification. Clearly, if, over a year after we sought the figure, a Department has not provided us with the drawdown that it had on the baseline year, it means that not only does the figure that we have to accomplish increase by the amount that it has not provided us with but it has to increase by 20% above that. That is because of our intention to increase by 20%. I am not sure of the exact figures; we will leave that to time to determine. However, we believe that it requires us to be able to draw down a further £5 million or thereabouts.

There is another factor, in that the foreign exchange rates have changed for the euro and the pound. That might have a helpful impact. However, it still seems likely that we will need to find probably an extra £5 million above what we had determined the target would be. We still

believe that we can reach that target. It was challenging in the first place, and it has got a bit more challenging as time has gone on. However, I think that there is greater understanding in the Departments of the importance for them not just of attempting to draw down funds but of encouraging others to do so, particularly in framework programme 7 or its new mode of Horizon 2020.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister update us on progress in maximising the opportunities presented by the Irish presidency of the EU?

**Mr P Robinson:** Even without the Irish presidency of the EU, we had recognised that our change from being an objective 1 area to an area that had to fight competitively for funds left us in a position where we perhaps had not all the skills in government that the Government of the Irish Republic had. They have been very helpful in allowing us to second members of our staff to their European unit so that we can pick up some of the tricks of the trade. They have been very successful in drawdown.

In relation to the Irish presidency, we have an arrangement with the Irish Government that we will have people from our Civil Service involved as the presidency moves forward. That helps them to build up networks, make contacts and see how things are done. Hopefully, the end result of all those put together will be a higher drawdown for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank the First Minister for his answers. Will he give any indication of the future expected drawdown of R&D moneys, given that we have been very slow in the past to maximise that potential?

**Mr P Robinson:** It is for that reason that we have set challenging targets to each Department. I do not envisage us saying at the end of this Programme for Government period that we have done well to achieve the 20% increase. I suspect that we will say that we want an increase on that increased figure. We will continue to push and stretch Departments.

Northern Ireland has a fantastic reputation for research and development. There are massive opportunities out there. There has been a tendency in the past to look at Europe as a difficult place to put in applications. We have put in place staff in our Brussels office to help with that process. We have Departments that are now more acquainted with how to improve their applications and make them more worthy of support. The conversations that the deputy

First Minister and I have had with the president of the Council, the president of the Parliament and the commissioners have resulted in full support from them for Northern Ireland being able to increase, as the Barroso task force encouraged us to, the amount of drawdown that we receive.

**Mr Kinahan:** Does the First Minister agree that the next round of Peace funds should be utilised to tackle the challenges that still exist in intergenerational educational underachievement?

**Mr P Robinson:** We are very fortunate that we have succeeded in having Peace IV provision included in the present European budget, which is at draft stage and still has to be approved by the Parliament. I remember that, when we completed Peace II, people doubted whether we could get a third intervention from Europe. It now looks as if we will succeed in getting a fourth. I welcome the combined approach that has been taken by the Northern Ireland MEPs in arguing the case for a fourth tranche of that fund. The deputy First Minister and I, along with the junior Ministers, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and others, have been out in Europe arguing that case. Although it is currently designated to be €150 million, which is slightly less than previously, it is a lot more than we had expected to get.

How will it be best used? We have some influence but no control over what Europe will eventually decide. Many of us consider reconciliation to be an area that is appropriate for the European Union to look at for peace funding for Northern Ireland. There are a number of good causes. The difficulty is that there are more good causes than there is money available to fund them properly. The more that are included in the European Union's assessment, the more divided the funds will be and the less they will have an impact in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 7 has been withdrawn.

## Older People's Strategy

8. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the strategy for older people. (AQO 3552/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer the question.

**Mr Bell:** The new draft active ageing strategy was extensively reworked during 2012 following the feedback from the ageing strategy advisory group, which was chaired by Claire Keatinge, the Commissioner for Older People. The advisory group provided very helpful feedback on the content of the current draft strategy and provided comments on the draft early actions plan that has been developed to implement the strategy. We are grateful to the group for its advice and expertise. Junior Minister McCann and I met Claire Keatinge and representatives from the age sector to discuss the development of the strategy. It highlights the key issues facing older people here. It will be implemented through the Delivering Social Change framework with a focus on what Departments can do to add to existing work to make a strategic change to services or programmes for older people.

The specific scope of the Delivering Social Change signature programmes, their associated targets and reporting mechanisms are currently the focus of discussion in all Departments. Once they are finalised, we will have a strategy and an early actions plan, the content of which, I am delighted to say, has been strongly influenced by older people and those who work closely with them. We hope to be in a position to launch the consultation for the strategy in late March or early April. It will take account of the views of older people, their representatives and, importantly, those who care for them.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the junior Minister for his answer. Will he assure the House that, in line with international practice, legislation on goods, facilities and services for over-18s will be implemented without delay?

**Mr Bell:** Yes. Anti-discrimination legalisation in relation to age is currently limited to the fields of employment, vocational training and further and higher education.

In answering the earlier question, I should have said that, following consultation and analysis, the final strategy will be published in the autumn of 2013.

The Programme for Government committed us to extending age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services. That will require new legislation to be taken through the Assembly. Prior to a new Bill being introduced in the Assembly, a considerable number of steps have to be taken to ensure that the legislation achieves the intended outcome. That will involve a period of detailed policy development, and we are at that stage now.

In Britain, the Equality Act 2010 provisions banning age discrimination against over-18-year-olds in the provision of goods, facilities and services and public functions came into operation on 1 October 2012. In July 2008, the European Commission issued a draft anti-discrimination directive that included protection in the provision of goods, facilities and services on the grounds of age. I understand that that is currently stalled in the Council.

Comparative analysis is also being undertaken to determine how other jurisdictions, such as Australia and Canada, which have age goods, facilities and services legislation in place, have made provision for all ages. That will inform our consideration of the scope of the legislation that we will introduce.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is useful that the junior Minister mentioned the position of children and young people. He has practically answered the question that I was going to ask.

Minister, you mentioned that the issue was stalled in the Council. Can you elaborate on that?

**Mr Bell:** I am not privy to the internal work of the Council. My understanding is that, in 2008, the European Commission issued the draft directive, which included a provision for protection in the provision of goods, facilities and service on the grounds of age. I am not sure what the current circumstances are, but we can certainly ask and seek to provide that information to you.

**Mr Lyttle:** I welcome the improved level of consultation that has been used in the strategy. Perhaps we could consider using that method for other strategies.

Does the junior Minister agree with the assessment that there is a benign prejudice against older people in our society? How does he hope that the strategy will tackle that prejudice?

**Mr Bell:** Many older people's groups have told us that they are delighted with the work that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister did, not only in establishing a commissioner but in establishing a commissioner with considerable teeth in the work that she does and what she can call in to examine. I have also spoken to the Pensioners Parliament, and I want to pay a considerable tribute to older people. After all, they are the people who made this society. I have also

talked to groups about childcare, and we see a continued reliance on grandparents, who do an excellent job in shaping the lives of children.

Issues such as travel insurance are of concern to me and, I think, to the Member. We are particularly concerned about what healthy older people are asked to pay for travel insurance simply on the grounds of their age. Northern Ireland overwhelmingly recognises the contribution that our older people make to our society, and the two words that I would say to that older generation would be, "Thank you".

2.30 pm

## Agriculture and Rural Development

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 2 and 11 have been withdrawn.

### Strangford Lough: Modiolus Mussels

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on actions taken to address the problem of the depletion of modiolus in Strangford lough. (AQO 3560/11-15)

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Modiolus modiolus, or horse mussel, biogenic reefs are a designated feature of the Strangford lough special area of conservation and are in an unfavourable condition. We are therefore required to restore the feature.

My Department shares responsibility for the restoration of these reefs with the Department of the Environment (DOE). My officials met the European Commission in April 2012 and informally accepted a number of actions that the Commission felt necessary to address responsibilities under the habitats directive for the protection and restoration of modiolus in Strangford lough. Those included the strict protection of the larger area of the lough that contains the remaining intact modiolus biogenic reef.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the DOE responded to the Strangford modiolus infringement pilot case by way of a letter on 18 May 2012 to the Ulster Wildlife Trust, addressing the Commission's concerns and outlining proposals for modiolus restoration and the management of fishing activity on the lough. The proposed



measures were described in more detail in a revised restoration plan that was sent to the Commission on 11 October 2012, and we await the Commission's formal response to those proposals.

In advance of receiving the Commission's decision, my Department has recently completed a habitats regulations assessment on pot fishing and aquaculture in Strangford lough, and on 8 January 2013, we introduced further restrictions on pot fishing by introducing two fishing exclusion zones in areas where restoration of modiolus beds is a priority. This legislation has been introduced as a result of discussions with Commission officials that indicated that this would be the minimum requirement acceptable to the Commission in respect of safeguarding and restoring the designated modiolus feature. In addition, the DOE has introduced by-laws regulating anchoring, mooring and diving.

**Ms Lo:** I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. What sort of dialogue has the Department had in the last while with the fishing industry in the area?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I have met the fishermen on a number of occasions, particularly around the response that we were to submit to Europe, because their livelihoods are impacted by any decisions that we take. I listened carefully to the Assembly debate last year, when the consensus in the House was that the impact on the livelihoods of those fishermen meant that there needed to be a proportionate response to the environmental issue. So I met them a number of times in the run-up to our submitting information to the Commission.

There is also ongoing engagement at official level with the fishing community. However, it is important that we continue to engage with them, particularly after we receive the formal confirmation from the Commission that it accepts our proposals, because that is when we can decide on the way forward and see whether any other roles for those fishermen can be explored.

**Mrs D Kelly:** What form will further discussions with fishing industry stakeholders take, and are any contingencies or other plans or avenues being explored to improve the fishing industry's income?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for the question. As I said, it is important that we wait for the formal acceptance from Europe of our plans, which we believe to be at least the

minimum that Europe will accept. The fact that we have had to expand the area that is closed to pot fishing means that fishermen will be displaced, and that must be seriously considered. I intend to meet the fishermen to discuss that, on the back of the plans. More science is needed, and among the suggestions brought forward is one that fishermen may have a role in providing it. There is some scope to explore the potential for people who will be displaced.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for that. Will she inform us whether there has been any memorandum of understanding between her Department and the Department of the Environment in relation to the outworkings of any proposals that may come forward, and, if so, what are the details of such a memorandum of understanding?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I can confirm to the Member that, because both my Department and DOE are impacted upon, we are working very closely on the issue. Drawing up the management plans and the proposals to be put to Europe was a joint piece of work. Queen's University carried out a large and comprehensive piece of scientific research and reported it to me and the Environment Minister back in July 2011. That is what we drew the enhanced plan from. That is what we have used as evidence to back it up.

We will continue to work very closely with DOE on that issue. DOE has actually brought forward by-laws on anchoring and mooring, as I said in the original answer, because we need to look at all of the factors that impact on pot fishing and the area that I look after. DOE also needs to bring forward the legislation — which it has done — that looks at protecting the lough and the long-term future sustainability of the lough.

**Mr Speaker:** Question No 2 has been withdrawn.

### Flooding: Greater Belfast

3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what additional resources her Department has made available to the Rivers Agency to address flooding in greater Belfast. (AQO 3562/11-15)

**Mrs O'Neill:** During the flooding in June 2012, staff from across the agency were diverted to provide assistance to those affected across greater Belfast. Considerable resources, including contractors, were then provided to remove blockages to the drainage network and

repair infrastructure. Following investigations into the causes of flooding, works have already been carried out and further works are planned for the coming financial year. Rivers Agency is also taking over the maintenance of and responsibility for a number of watercourses that contributed to the flooding. In co-operation with councils, additional sandbag storage facilities have also been provided.

I have already made additional funding available for flood alleviation works in the greater Belfast area this year, and I have allocated £2.5 million and £3.5 million respectively over the next 2 financial years for flood alleviation works in east Belfast. Improvements to the drainage network will continue to be a priority, and in order to deliver those, recruitment of additional staff for the greater Belfast area is also being undertaken.

I am very aware of the distress and hardship caused by flooding and the concerns that many homeowners have in regard to home insurance. As recently as 31 January this year, I, along with public representatives and Rivers Agency officials, visited an area in Finaghy to see at first hand what actions are being undertaken to reduce any further risk of flooding. As requested at that meeting, a commitment was given to residents that I would provide them with a letter of comfort, which they could use in discussions with their insurance companies in respect of the works that are planned for 2013-14. I can confirm that that was issued to those residents.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the Rivers Agency is under-resourced, especially for addressing risk areas that were highlighted last year during the floods?

**Mrs O'Neill:** No one could have predicted the heavy rainfall that occurred in June 2012, which, I assume, is the incident that you are referring to. I do not think that any plan in place would have been able to mitigate the results of that particularly heavy rain, although that is one of recommendations of the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) report, and the Executive are actively looking at that.

As I said, I have actually recruited extra staff for the work that will be done in the greater Belfast area. I think that we have four new members of staff, who will come on board to be involved in the regular inspection of drains and making sure that culverts are not blocked. That, in itself, is a help to Rivers Agency in that area. Funding for flood alleviation is always going to be prioritised based on level of risk to people

and property and the associated costs and benefits of providing the flood alleviation measures. I hope that the Member is somewhat assured that we actually have employed extra staff for the Belfast area.

**Mr McDevitt:** I acknowledge the Minister's visit to Finaghy at the end of January. I am sure that, when she was there, she will have heard that the underlying issue in most of the city is the question of so-called undesignated waterways — culverts that were laid informally over the past 100 years and that belong to nobody. What steps does the Minister intend to take to progressively bring undesignated waterways under the control of the Rivers Agency so that we do not ever have to walk through the mud again?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member will be aware that there is a role for the Drainage Council in the designation of water courses. There are criteria in place. Anybody can apply to have a watercourse designated. I regularly receive correspondence from Members who feel that particular watercourses should be designated. It is something that we should explore further when we are looking at new legislation on flooding over the next number of years. We should return to the designation criteria that are currently being used. Suffice to say, the criteria are there for a reason. They are there to prioritise works that need to be done.

As regards my visit to south Belfast, it is clear that a combination of issues need to be dealt with. A combination of agencies need to work together. I am confident that the Rivers Agency is playing its role in working with the other agencies.

**Mr Copeland:** I begin by thanking the Minister for her very prompt responses to one or two communications about flooding that I sent to her office. She may recall one in which I discussed the possibility of a grants scheme or advanced loan scheme for the residents of homes that are flooded most continually. That would be paid, by agreement, directly to companies that could install flood protection systems. Have you given any further thought to these matters? If so, where are we with them?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I assure the Member that I listened to the case that he put forward. I met a number of people who also believe that that is the way to go. In fact, the Rivers Agency is looking at that as an option. While I cannot be any more positive on that option at this stage, I am exploring it. It is a genuine avenue that could be explored. It would not be a simple process,

as there would obviously be all sorts of procurement issues to deal with, but the Rivers Agency is actively looking at it.

## Bovine Tuberculosis

4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with her counterparts in Westminster in relation to the development of a vaccination for cattle to prevent the spread of bovine tuberculosis. (AQO 3563/11-15)

**Mrs O'Neill:** While I have not had any meetings with UK Ministers specifically on the subject of cattle vaccination for bovine TB, I am kept fully informed of developments. My officials are in regular contact with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales via monthly TB liaison group teleconferences and their counterparts in the South of Ireland. EU Commission legislation prohibits the vaccination of cattle against bovine TB. The use of cattle TB vaccination would interfere with the tuberculin skin test. Any cattle so vaccinated would, therefore, react positively to that test.

Research continues in England into the feasibility of developing such a vaccine and to develop a DIVA test to differentiate between infected and vaccinated animals. Such a test has been developed, but it has not yet been trialled and validated in field conditions. Recent correspondence from Commissioner Borg sets out a time frame for the possible use of a vaccine against bovine TB in the EU. It sets out the series of steps that would need to be undertaken to secure the scientific validation and approvals before any change to the legislative position would be considered to allow cattle vaccination.

We will wish to be certain that any such vaccine that is developed has international acceptance before considering its use here, given the value of our export-dependent trade in livestock and livestock products. We must ensure that our export trade is not compromised as a consequence. Care will have to be taken to avoid trade embargoes on the export of livestock and livestock products. It is also desirable that we have an all-island approach to this issue.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she expand on the work being done to examine a more efficient way of testing for TB given that many farmers believe that the current system is outdated, time-consuming and too costly?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I think that, when people initially started to talk about vaccination, they thought that it was a miracle cure. However, as you will be aware, TB is a very complicated, multifactorial disease with a number of things that contribute to it. Unfortunately, at this stage, vaccination is not the answer to everything. The Commission is exploring it. It has set out a 10-year plan to get the science right and make sure that it is tested in the field. Only then could we use it.

As I said, it is a very complicated disease. However, as regards what we are doing, I have announced the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) wildlife intervention research piece. That is very positive and has been broadly welcomed across the board. There are obviously environmental concerns, but I want to assure farmers that we are trying to do everything that we can to make sure that we tackle the disease, look at the factors and take forward the TVR approach that I announced.

**Mr Frew:** The Minister will be aware of the deep concerns of Dairy UK in Northern Ireland about the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee's review on this very subject. The Minister alluded to the seriousness of this for our export market. Has she any plans to speak to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in light of the EFRA Committee's review to make sure that it is aware of the consequences for the export of milk and milk products if any part of our country cannot vaccinate cattle?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I assure the Member that I will continue to engage with DEFRA on all issues to reflect the needs of our local industry. As I said, there is monthly correspondence between officials, but I regularly engage with DEFRA officials — at least once a month — on general agricultural issues. I will be meeting them again on 18 March, which will be another opportunity for us to have some discussions on those very issues. It is vital that we make sure that we do not disadvantage our local industry from the potential, and, given how reliant we are on the trade, it is vital that we export. So, I will make sure that we are not disadvantaged in any shape or form.

2.45 pm

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she give us the latest position on the badger test, vaccinate or remove policy?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his question. As I said, I have announced the first badger sett survey, which will take place in an area of 100 square kilometres between Banbridge and Rathfriland. That area has been chosen because it has high badger density, high herd density and high confirmed levels of bovine TB. The second badger sett survey location will be announced in the very near future, and the results of the Food and Environment Research Agency modelling and the badger sett surveys will be important to the design and costings of the TVR wildlife intervention research.

I am quite positive about the fact that we were able to get this announced and that we have it on the ground. There is lots more work to be done, but I know that it has been broadly welcomed across industry. As I said earlier in answer to Mr Frew's question, it is something that has been welcomed, and it is important that we get a balance between looking towards the needs of our farming industry and the fact that badgers are a protected species. So, I think that we have a good balance, and having broad consensus is a positive way to go. I am committed to making sure that we move forward in as effective a manner as possible.

## Farm Maps

5. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how many preliminary farm maps issued in 2013 have been found to contain errors. (AQO 3564/11-15)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The farm maps are first and foremost a control tool that should enable more accurate payments to farmers in a timely way. The positive response of farmers and agricultural consultants across the North in correcting the maps that were issued in January and February has been extremely encouraging and is entirely in line with what the European Commission would expect. That response will be extremely valuable in ensuring more accurate and timely payments later in the year.

Just under 38,000 maps were issued in three batches. The first two batches went out in January without a hitch, but in the third batch, which issued on a minority of maps, there was a technical fault that resulted in 3,560 farm business maps having a significant number of fields missing when compared with the farmer's previous single application form. The underlying data held by the Department were not affected, and the technical problem has been resolved. Those farmers affected will

have two additional weeks, until 6 March, to correct the maps.

I have issued a press release advising affected farmers that amended maps are available online and via DARD Direct offices. Additionally, their single application forms will be printed and sent out two weeks later than originally planned to provide additional time to advise of any necessary map adjustments, which can be preprinted along with the updated farmer's report. My Department has written to all affected farmers advising them of that.

**Mrs Dobson:** This sorry episode is only typical of what we have come to expect from a Department that blunders from one humiliation to another. In any other profession, the Minister and those responsible would have been sacked months ago. Does the Minister agree that those mistakes have had a knock-on impact on all farmers across the Province? Even those whose maps were OK have found it all but impossible to make appointments with their local DARD Direct offices.

**Mrs O'Neill:** No, I do not agree that it has had a knock-on effect for all farmers. I think that you need to put it in context and not blow it out of proportion. Three sets of maps of over 38,000 maps in total were issued. There was a technical problem with a small number of the third batch, which equated to around 9% of all the maps that were issued. That was unfortunate, but it was identified very quickly. All farmers have been informed and given additional time to complete their paperwork. Also, in case the Member wants to scaremonger again, I assure farmers that no penalties will be applied as a result of mapping issues.

So, it is an ongoing problem. It was fixed very quickly. I am confident that the action was taken very quickly to fix it. So, I do not agree that it has had a knock-on effect on farmers, because it affected only the farmers who received the incorrect maps.

The other point to make is that the underlying data held by the Department still exist: the maps were wrong, but the detail of individual fields is all correct in the system. It was just the maps that were wrong. That was unfortunate, but it has been corrected.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Does she accept that this has been another embarrassing fiasco by DARD, and will she agree that it would perhaps have been more advisable to use the good offices of the

Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, which has a lot of expertise in mapping?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member will agree that the major process of remapping 750,000 fields is a very big piece of work. We are doing that to make sure that we meet the Commission standards. We have been on a difficult journey, but I am confident that we are very close to being complete and having maps that are fit for purpose. Next year, when we are fully engaged with the land parcel identification system (LPIS) map and have only one mapping system in place, we will be in a far better position.

You have to put it in context. A small number of maps out of 38,000 maps were affected. Most were perfectly fine, and farmers found them very useful. It is a technical problem. It is unfortunate that it happened, but the problem was rectified within days. Farmers have all been advised of the problem and given extra time to get their maps completed and to get them back in again. I am content that the issues are being dealt with.

**Mr Irwin:** The Minister can try to dress up the large number of errors in the maps in whatever way she likes, but there were 3,560 in the last batch, and many other maps had errors and had to be rectified by the Department, because, for a number of weeks before that, farmers were visiting the Department to try to get errors fixed. Will the Minister give an assurance to the House today that enough time will be given to farmers to ensure that the errors are all rectified? The allotted time is not enough.

**Mrs O'Neill:** No farmer has approached me to say that the extra time is not sufficient. As I said, a large number of maps were perfectly fine. As the Member knows, there are a number of features to consider when you are mapping a field and trying to get maps correct. As I have consistently said, this is a two-way process between the Department and the farmer, and we should work together to get the maps right. We are trying to do that with the new LPIS mapping system next year.

I have allowed extra time for farmers, and, if any farmer approaches me needing extra time, we will work with the farmer to make sure that we get the mapping system right. That is the key. There is £300 million of European moneys available through single farm payments, and we want to make sure that it is drawn down appropriately and that our farmers get the maximum drawdown. Therefore, making sure that the maps are right is the responsibility of both the Department and the farmer.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Shared grazing is causing remapping problems for farmers. What can the Minister and her Department do to help alleviate that problem?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am aware of the issue of shared grazing and that the majority of farmers are able to make the transition to the new mapping arrangements by coming to an understanding with other claimants of their single feed by erecting a permanent barrier. However, I am also aware — it has been raised with me previously — of the concerns of a number of small farmers, because that is proving very difficult for them. I have given an undertaking to farmers that I have discussed the matter with, and I can give an undertaking to the Member that we will look at that, because I want to find a solution for those farmers. It is only a small number, but it is small farmers that are being impacted on, and I want to find a solution for them.

**DARD: Headquarters**

6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she can guarantee that relocating her Department's headquarters to Ballykelly is the most desirable option if a business case is not developed for any other site. (AQO 3565/11-15)

**Mrs O'Neill:** As Members will be aware, the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development headquarters to a rural area is a Programme for Government commitment. Work is well under way to develop a business case, and that will be informed by supporting work on staff surveys, identification of options to accommodate DARD requirements and an assessment of the equality impacts of the decision to move to a rural location. I expect a final decision on the business case by the summer.

The process of deciding on the Ballykelly site involved the consideration of the various Civil Service strategies, including the regional development strategy, which we are mandated to do. A long list of potential locations was taken from the strategy, and each location was then scored against a defined set of objective criteria, which included nine socio-economic factors such as unemployment levels, deprivation and earnings levels, as well as practical considerations such as the number of public sector and Civil Service jobs already sited in the area.

The analysis indicated that the two top local government districts were both in the north-west; namely, Strabane and Limavady. I made my decision to locate to Ballykelly based on two further factors: the availability of the Executive-owned site at Shackleton Barracks and the potential availability of buildings on that site.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Keeping in mind that other locations achieved very similar scores — indeed, one location scored significantly higher — are you saying that the scores do not warrant further scrutiny and assessment?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I have said very clearly that we had a Programme for Government commitment to move to a rural area. I took the decision based on all of the factors that I have already mentioned and which I mention repeatedly in Question Time in the House and am happy to repeat. We looked at the regional development strategy, which identified that long list that we started off with.

This is all done by an established programme board, which applied the socio-economic criteria and scored accordingly. Two areas in the north-west came out on top, and the fact that Ballykelly is an Executive-owned site means that it is value for money and saves money to the public purse. That in itself was an advantage, as was the potential to use the existing buildings. So the decision was based on all of those criteria, which are transparent and open for everyone to see.

**Mr G Robinson:** Does the Minister agree that her Department relocating to Ballykelly is in line with the Bain report on placing public sector jobs throughout Northern Ireland?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I agree with the Member. It will be a significant advantage to the rural location of Ballykelly, given that it will stimulate the local economy. There will be construction, the ongoing servicing of the building and the spend impact on the local community, so it is all very positive for the Ballykelly area.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. Will an equality impact assessment (EQIA) of the relocation be carried out?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I assure the Member that a full EQIA is being carried out on the decision to relocate to Ballykelly. The work is at pre-consultation stage, and a wide range of groups has been invited to give views to shape the

formal consultation document. The pre-consultation exercise involves face-to-face discussions and written requests for feedback. The formal public consultation period is due to begin in mid-March of this year, and, when it is completed, the Department will consider all of the views that are returned, agree appropriate actions, including any implications for the preferred location, produce an agreed action plan and complete the final EQIA report. That will all feed into the business case.

**Mr Dallat:** I am sure that the Minister will accept that I am in no way biased about jobs going to Ballykelly, given the history of the haemorrhaging of jobs in recent years. Will the Minister assure the House that, when she has done the paperwork, the jobs will come to Ballykelly and we can get on with planning, which is an important aspect of that?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There are a number of areas of work that we want to continue. For me, and as the Member will agree, this is an opportunity to address the existing disparity in the distribution of public sector jobs. Bringing jobs out of the greater Belfast area and into a rural location sends a strong message to the public that the Executive and the Assembly are committed to addressing that disparity. It will create an opportunity to share the wealth right across the North. It is a very positive move. I want to get the business case signed off, get the EQIA completed and ensure that we move forward as speedily as possible and deliver on the commitment in the Programme for Government.

**Mr Speaker:** Paul Givan is not in place to ask question 7.

## Plant Security

8. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the action her Department is taking to address plant security as a result of the experience from ash dieback disease. (AQO 3567/11-15)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The ongoing experience of ash dieback disease shows the importance of agreeing the approach on plant health measures, using a fortress Ireland approach with those most likely to be affected by disease, such as woodland owners, farmers and hurley manufacturers. As a result, I have been able to co-ordinate with the South the introduction of legislation on ash plants for planting, and ash wood and bark.

I am considering further legislation, also in conjunction with the South, to introduce a requirement for the pre-notification of imports of

certain species of trees from other countries in the EU. Pre-notification could assist in preventing disease outbreaks and, importantly, provide intelligence about plant movements and assist in tracing problems. It is important that our biosecurity is strengthened to reduce the risk of pests and disease entering our island.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she reassure me that the action that she has taken will be effective in protecting native trees and associated woodlands?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I assure the Member that we are working towards that. We are also working with the industry. It is very important that we engage with our stakeholders. We went through the winter when the symptoms are not as obvious, but, as we enter spring, we have a full plan in place to ensure that we are ready to go and that the surveillance is ongoing. We look to examples of other European countries that have had the disease and been able to look at it.

### 3.00 pm

We are working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in the South, and we will continue to do so. The plan that we have in place is very proactive. At present, it appears that the disease is only in young plants. We want to make sure that that remains the case and that we can deal with it and not allow it to become established in our native trees.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes Question Time.

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]*

## Adjournment

### Roads: M1 Link to the Maze Site

**Mr Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have 5 minutes.

**Mr Craig:** With regard to the Adjournment debate — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Members will please leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

**Mr Craig:** In the Maze site, potentially, we have one of the largest investments that can take place in Northern Ireland; it is a 375-acre site that was originally the site of an airport in World War II. Those who live in the area know the history of the site. Between 1941 and 1945, it was used as a stop-off between the United States and Great Britain, and it saw thousands of American bombers come over to Europe. The site was also used to provide the north Atlantic convoy routes with cover, which made it one of the busiest airports in the entire world during those years.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the site was used as a prison. That is where recent history probably sees it. It became famous for its infamous H-blocks, hunger strikes and, for those of us who lived only up the road, the breakout as well. Those were all hugely negative, and residents, like myself, had to put up with an awful lot over those years.

In more recent times, the site was passed to the Northern Ireland Executive and then to the Maze regeneration team, which now has the site. It was proposed as the site for the Northern Ireland sports stadium, but, sadly for all of us in Lagan Valley, that project collapsed. The Maze development corporation was established and board members appointed. Discussions took place with the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS), and the historic decision was taken by the society to relocate to the Maze. The famous Balmoral show will take place at the Maze this May, and arrangements are being made for the more local Saintfield show to take place at the site. The society has plans to develop the site over the next 10 to 15 years, and it will include not only exhibition and

show space but an equestrian centre of excellence.

Last week, I had the privilege of visiting the site; I was given a tour of the RUAS site and saw how it is developing. I can report that it is developing very well. They have already planted the main showgrounds and the site of the equestrian centre. The basis for much of the road infrastructure is now in situ, and I look forward to seeing it finished in the very near future.

That leads us to other issues. There are no major links from the site to the M1, the main motorway infrastructure, at present. Traffic is expected to use the Moira Road, which is an A-class road, and the Halftown and Harrys roads, which are both C-class roads. No doubt, in the short term — for the first year or two of the show's life — that will cause traffic issues in the area. I know that the corporation, local residents, the PSNI and others are working very hard to minimise the impact, but, no doubt, that will restrict the potential for RUAS at this site for the first couple of years. In the medium to long term, such measures are not sustainable. Traffic congestion and the inevitable delays will strangle the site's potential. If the site is to develop and achieve its full potential, it is clear that more road links that directly link to the M1 are required. Not only would that help to drive improvements to the Balmoral show but it would unlock the rest of the site for future development.

I am glad to say that I have learned that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has set aside around £30 million for road infrastructure on the Maze site, which will include a bridge over the M1 to support traffic coming from the west of the Province and a new dual carriageway out to Sprucefield linking to the M1 at the existing park-and-ride site. The reasons why both had to be developed were purely down to engineering issues with an existing bridge across the motorway and site restrictions in getting a direct link to the motorway. However, those are all positive issues that need to be moved forward urgently if the site is to have its full potential unlocked.

Those new roads will provide an opportunity for the development of the whole south Lisburn area around Sprucefield. Opening up the Maze site will unlock the potential for 1,000 acres of industrial and housing development in the south Lisburn area. Sprucefield, and the link that will go into the Sprucefield site, has huge potential. In the past, there was what was infamously known as the Knockmore link to Sprucefield.

Unfortunately, that was never truly developed. The new road will be the first quarter of the Knockmore link. I appeal to my colleagues in the Executive, and in Roads Service in particular, to finish the Knockmore link if they can find the funds because that will be the economic driver that not only will unlock the potential for the Maze but will unlock the potential that is hidden in the industrial heartland at the south of Lisburn. As a government, we all need to see that. I believe that that is estimated to be a £10 million investment, if the Executive can find it, and it would open up not only the development of the Maze but the Knockmore industrial estate, which has waited patiently for 20 years and has been one of the most successful industrial sites for the expansion of jobs in Northern Ireland. The potential for increased investment from private developers is absolutely huge.

The Maze site must develop and attract world-renowned, high-technology industries and bring the prosperity to Northern Ireland that we are all crying out for and all our future children are looking for. In the 1980s, I had the bitter experience of coming out of university as an engineering graduate, and three quarters of my class are now spread not only to mainland UK but throughout the world. I do not want a repeat of that for my children. I want us to make the investments that will unlock the huge potential at the Maze site. Let us see world-class industry coming to that site and giving our children and our children's children the future that they deserve. I commend this to you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Givan, and the Member has roughly five minutes.

**Mr Givan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can I take this first opportunity in the House to apologise for not being in my place to ask my question to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development during Question Time? I was unduly delayed in a meeting. Therefore, I submit my apologies, Mr Speaker.

I support my colleague Mr Craig in the Adjournment debate that he has brought forward. It is important that the site gets proper road infrastructure improvements. Therefore, the £30 million that is being allocated to it is welcome indeed. If the site is to achieve its full potential and be an economic driver for our Northern Ireland economy, the infrastructure needs to be improved. It is ideally located along the Belfast-Dublin corridor to attract people from the west of the Province and to bring people up from the Southern market.



Therefore, the site needs to be readily accessible. There is no point in people being able to get to Sprucefield very quickly and then facing delays because they are unable to get access to the Maze site. So, getting the road infrastructure in place is critical to the site developing properly.

In developing the roads infrastructure, it is also important that the Department takes on board any concerns that may come forward from the local residents, particularly the Halftown Road residents association, which, for decades, endured the security paraphernalia that went along with the Maze prison. Now that the site is being developed, it is critical that any views that they have on how the infrastructure is to be developed are taken on board and reflected on.

Improvements have been carried out on some roads. Indeed, the Blaris Road was recently resurfaced. Getting that road improvement in place will benefit the Maze site and the local community group in addressing all its concerns around this issue. I support the development, and I support the allocation of £30 million, trusting that it can be developed in conjunction with local people's views being taken on board.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for coming to the House and apologising for not being in his place for Question Time. I hope that that will set an example for other Members to come to the House and explain why they were not in their place.

**Mrs Hale:** I thank my colleague Jonathan Craig for keeping this issue very much on the agenda in the House. I welcome the opportunity to speak today. Many Members will know that I am passionate about the development at Maze and the regeneration that it will bring. I am also very concerned about the road network and infrastructure surrounding the site, especially in relation to the Culcavy Road, Halftown Road and Harry's Road. Many of those roads were never designed to accommodate high volumes of traffic in the long term.

A number of weeks ago, I met the Maze development team and its chair, Mr Brannigan. They are considering two new entrances to the site, the most significant of which is reliant on the M1 link road. Indeed, they have stated that the M1 link road access issue is always raised in preliminary discussions with potential investors in the site and employers. Its importance cannot be underplayed.

Having asked questions and quizzed the Minister for Regional Development on the issue for many, many months, I have concerns that

there seems to be little urgency to ensure that developments are brought about sooner rather than later. Indeed, it has been put on record that any plans to address the link road will not happen until after 2015, as it does not fall within the strategic road improvement programme. Therefore, progression of the M1 bypass proposal will only be subject to funding after 2015. Only at the beginning of February of this year, I asked the Minister in a priority question for written answer to detail his plans for the provision of the access roads to the Maze/Long Kesh site during and after the Balmoral show in May 2013. The Minister's answer detailed only how traffic will be managed during the show, but he gave no details of the future road infrastructure, and, consequently, he did not answer my question.

Residents in the area have concerns that additional traffic in the vicinity will lead to long tailbacks and congestion, especially at times of peak traffic flow, and we need to bear it in mind that no solution has yet been found to prevent large volumes of traffic and heavy goods vehicles using those small rural roads as a bypass. It seems difficult to understand how the present infrastructure will cope with the additional traffic planned for the Maze regeneration site.

If I were being totally solution-focused, I would believe that the time is right to push on the M1 link road. It has been stated that there is no budget for the project, but I hear today that OFDMFM has agreed money. It is vital that all the relevant Departments sit down and see whether plans can be found to get the projects started sooner rather than later. Not only will it support the development of the Maze regeneration site, it will help to solve a number of the traffic problems that our constituents who live in this rural area face every day.

**3.15 pm**

**Mr Poots:** I appreciate the opportunity to say a few words on the issue.

Maze/Long Kesh gives Northern Ireland an opportunity to develop something of huge significance that can lead to real and serious inward investment and provide quality facilities that tens of thousands of people can enjoy. The scale and location of the site lend themselves to being one of the most strategically placed quality facilities in Northern Ireland for inward investment. To achieve that, though, it is incumbent on us to ensure that the opportunity can be delivered as quickly as possible, and for that we need the infrastructure to be in place. There is also an excellent

opportunity for telecommunications, with Project Kelvin running just past the site.

Given the site's accessibility to the M1 and A1, we also have the opportunity to ensure that it can be hugely attractive to people not just from Northern Ireland and can attract inward investment from the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, it is of absolute importance that we recognise at an early point that the infrastructure issue needs to be addressed in a positive and progressive way.

The RUAS is moving to the site this year. We will see how things pan out. The Down Royal races take place close to the site, with up to 10,000 people attending each day, and we do not have many problems. However, the RUAS is a further step up from that, with 80,000 people attending an event over three days. That is a considerable increase in numbers. To be perfectly honest — I should declare an interest because I am a member of the RUAS — we do not want those figures to stay at 80,000; we want them to go upwards significantly. To achieve that, we need those couple of miles of access from the main roads — the M1 and A1 — to be developed quickly and strategically and have quality infrastructure put in place. The Knockmore/Sprucefield link is a must to be delivered. That will open up an entire area for industrial and leisure development and employment opportunities. I trust that OFMDFM, in conjunction with DRD in particular, will be a driving force to ensure that all that happens.

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank and congratulate the Member for bringing the debate to the House. The site, as we know from the Members who spoke previously, is of huge regional significance to this part of the island. It has major economic, social, regeneration and reconciliation potential.

There are two strands to the site. One is the EU-funded peace-building and conflict resolution facility. That has the potential to be a world-class facility to strengthen our peace-building expertise and, indeed, share our experience with the rest of the world. It is positive that that has the potential to transform a site that has been associated with the conflict and bring it into something more positive and futuristic. It is a physical expression of how our society has transformed from conflict to peace and has major potential to attract people from all around the world to come here, hear our story and learn about our conflict and how we have moved away from it.

The second strand, which was referred to, is the decision to relocate the RUAS onto 65 acres of the site, which will house the Balmoral show. That will provide an international standard facility with a main arena, equine and livestock show rings and associated landscaping and infrastructure. As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and a rural MLA, I heartily welcome the development. It has huge economic potential in itself and can act as a catalyst for further development on that strategically important site.

Getting on to the topic of the link to the M1, I think that it is hugely important. It is important to get people onto the site, especially those from the rural areas, from areas outside Belfast and from places in the west, such as down in Tyrone, where I am from. It is vital. I support the view that direct access from the M1 is vital. It is hugely important to realise the potential of this strategic site.

Of course, the pledge in the Programme for Government commitment 15 was to:

*"develop Maze/Long Kesh as a regeneration site of regional significance".*

I also note that, when Minister Attwood announced in January his decision to grant planning permission, he made reference to the necessity of effective planning as a key component. The fact that the proposed site will have parking facilities for 10,000 cars gives us an indication of its potential through the sheer number of people who could be visiting it at various times over the year.

The development of the Maze/Long Kesh project is of huge regional importance, and it is obvious that it has to be matched with proper infrastructure so that the site's potential can be realised. I thank Mr Craig for bringing this debate to the House today, and I can certainly pledge my support and, indeed, that of my party for this infrastructure development.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I too thank Mr Craig for tabling this afternoon's Adjournment debate. Some Members may wonder why I am speaking on it, but I live in the area of Aghalee, which is not too far away from the area in question. Many Members have focused on the Sprucefield and Harry's Road end of the site, but there is also the question of Maghaberry and Moira to consider. Those of us who have to travel up the M1 and leave it at the Moira junction roundabout will know about the tailbacks that can be there already at that time and about the amount of traffic that goes through the village of

Moira. So, there needs to be a much broader analysis of the area's infrastructural needs.

I want to put on record my thanks to the two junior Ministers for their presence here to hear the debate this afternoon. I would also welcome their views on the concept that the developer pays. We all know that, when a new site is opened, part of the cost of the infrastructure is actually placed on the developer. So, I want to know whether that will be part of the business case in the overall development of the Maze site.

Members will also be aware of the railway station at Moira. The Regional Development Committee is looking at integrated transport systems and at community transport in particular. So, in looking at the needs for traffic arrangements, it is also important that we look at the infrastructure in totality in relation to public use and at the opportunities that exist with having a railway halt in such close proximity.

I join others in wishing the RUAS well in its plans to avail itself of the site. I would also be interested to hear from the junior Ministers about the business case and, indeed, the initial development proposals, which included, as far as I can recall, opportunities for retail, office and housing. I would also be interested to hear how the needs of anyone who is going to live on that broader site will be addressed in relation to the totality of the infrastructure.

**Mrs Overend:** The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the potentially substantial social and economic benefits that the utilisation of former security sites such as the Maze site can bring. In general, we want the sites to be used, where possible, to the benefit of local communities. Alternatively, if that is not possible, they could be sold to create much-needed revenue that can be ploughed back into front line services.

Under the original proposals in the Maze/Long Kesh master plan and implementation strategy of May 2006, the scenarios that were identified included a multiparty sports stadium; a rural excellence and equestrian zone, including an international exhibition centre and showgrounds; offices, hotels and a leisure village; the creation of up to 4,000 jobs; a community zone; high-quality new housing; parkland and landscaping; and a new highway and public transport.

None of those proposals has been taken forward. It is disappointing that, after so long, the Maze site is still not being utilised to its full potential.

There have been some positive developments. For example, the Ulster Unionist Party fully supports the decision of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society, as was mentioned, to move the Balmoral show from the King's Hall to the Maze site. That is, of course, a prestigious annual three-day event. It is Northern Ireland's largest agriculture and food show, and it attracts in the region of 70,000-plus visitors. There was also the possibility of the Ulster Aviation Society running more events on the site, given its impressive aircraft collection. Indeed, I have seen that for myself, Mr Speaker, and it is something that we really could build on. Hopefully, the junior Minister will be able to update us on the current status of that.

However, aspects of what is being done could be described as being insensitive to victims. The Ulster Unionist Party does not agree with the peace-building and conflict resolution centre being located at the Maze. An example of a location that would be more suitable is the Crumlin Road jail. There is also an issue over the running costs of the centre, as it is projected to run at a significant annual loss of £650,000. That is difficult to justify to the taxpayer. However, that is a debate that has been had before, and there is no need to rehearse it today.

The Adjournment debate specifically mentions the road infrastructure of the M1 to the Maze site. Of course, it is important that we have an infrastructure that is sufficient to meet the demands of its users. That is especially the case, given that, as outlined previously, the Balmoral show attracts over 70,000 visitors, with around 100,000 visitors a year expected for the peace centre. If the Maze site is finally developed to the scale originally envisaged, it is up to the Finance Minister to provide the necessary funds to upgrade any aspect of the M1 link that may be considered not to be up to standard. Clarification from the junior Minister on how OFMDFM took the surrounding infrastructure into account as it planned for the future of the Maze site would be welcomed.

The Maze site is a project that has been taken forward by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and they must prove that they are capable of seeing through the regeneration of that former security site in its entirety. That includes having the necessary infrastructure. The Maze corporation board also has a major role to play, and, hopefully, the Minister will be able to update us on that.

**Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** I

start by thanking the Member who put down the topic for debate. Is he still here? He is. I thank him for the interest he has expressed to date in the regeneration of this important strategic site.

The regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh is a high priority cited in the Programme for Government objectives for 2011-15. Commitment number 15 states our priority to:

*"Develop Maze/Long Kesh as a regeneration site of regional significance."*

A key milestone under that commitment is to commence the site infrastructure development work in 2014-15.

The Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation was established in September 2012 to regenerate the site, and it is now responsible for its regeneration, including the provision of road infrastructure. Although the regeneration plans are at a very early stage, linking the site to the M1 is identified as a high priority for the corporation, as it has the potential to attract further private sector investment to the site. However, as Members will be aware, road infrastructure is a complex process involving extensive stakeholder engagement, business case approval, design, planning permission, procurement and construction, among many other things.

Initial survey work and a feasibility study are under way by the development corporation, with a view to producing detailed proposals in due course. The proposals will consider all road infrastructure options for improving access to the site. Until that work is completed, a preferred option cannot be identified.

I encourage the Member and other interested individuals to contribute to the stakeholder engagement to help ensure the success of the project. I am pleased to report that, even at this early stage, local residents have received an initial briefing from the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation outlining the process.

The provision of road infrastructure has already been identified to improve access to the site, and that is the responsibility of the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. Funding has now been identified and allocated by OFMDFM in the current CSR period for that purpose.

### **3.30 pm**

The provision of road infrastructure development outside that objective is the responsibility of the Department for Regional

Development. Public sector funding for essential infrastructure at Maze/Long Kesh is vital and will help to attract further private sector funding to the site.

I want to touch on some issues that Members raised. The RUAS is working closely with the PSNI on traffic management for the show, including monitoring cameras. All visitor parking for the show will be on site. OFMDFM allocated £21 million in the current CSR period for a feasibility study, which is being undertaken to consider the road infrastructure options. The Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation is developing a transport plan, which will include the use of rail and other transport options, such as a cycle network.

In closing, I want to make a number of quick points. The development corporation has made considerable progress on the provision of some internal roads at Maze/Long Kesh to improve traffic management and help to ensure the success of the agricultural show, which will be held on the site in May 2013. Some issues have already been dealt with, as I outlined. There is also improved access to the site. In particular, the development of a link to the M1 is key to the site's development.

The regeneration of the former military site represents a major opportunity to impact on many aspects and sectors of society here and further afield. There is no doubt that challenges lie ahead, particularly in the current economic climate. I appreciate the interest expressed in the debate as we move forward work on the Maze/Long Kesh site to maximise the economic, historical and reconciliatory potential of this regionally significant site.

I hope that that satisfies the Member who secured the debate. If Members have any other concerns, they can ask me about them outside of the Chamber.

*Adjourned at 3.32 pm.*





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