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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 May 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: The business motion to suspend Standing Order 20(1) will allow Question Time to begin at 1.00 pm.

Mr Weir: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 19 May 2014.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 19 May 2014.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Agriculture

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I will make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act regarding the 21st meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in agriculture sector format, which was held in Armagh on Wednesday 16 April 2014. The Executive were represented by Minister Edwin Poots MLA and me. The Dublin Government were represented by Simon Coveney TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Minister Coveney chaired the meeting. The statement has been agreed with Minister Poots, and I make it on behalf of us both.

Ministers had a discussion on potential priorities for the agriculture sector and noted that those will be contained in a report to be considered at a future NSMC institutional meeting as part of the ongoing review into sectoral priorities. Ministers also discussed recent developments in international trade, which included ongoing negotiations with China, including the hosting of Chinese visitors interested in the North's agrifood industry and Chinese graduate students availing themselves of College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) expertise as part of their thoroughbred internship. There was discussion about recent success in opening export markets such as Singapore. Ministers also discussed the merits of establishing an international trade working group to help further exports from across Ireland. DARD and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) officials are working together to take that forward.

The Council noted the plans, proposals and key issues arising from implementation of the common agricultural policy (CAP) reforms agreed in 2013.

Ministers agreed on the continued close contact between officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development concerning the policy options arising from the reform package and practical implementation issues.

The Council noted that a detailed document on plant health and pesticides was presented to the NSMC in agriculture format in November 2013. Ministers acknowledged that the Departments have worked closely in developing the protocol for the cross-border movement of larch logs that are infected with *P ramorum*, which was planned to be finalised by Easter 2014. It was noted that the all-Ireland Chalara ash dieback conference took place on 8 May.

Ministers welcomed the continued work on the delivery of an all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan since the last NSMC agriculture meeting. That work includes applications by each relevant competent authority to the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) for peste des petits ruminants-free status, or sheep disease. It also includes DAFM making African horse sickness regulations, which now means that there is a large degree of parity on the island for the control of any outbreak of this serious epizootic disease. Ministers welcomed that DAFM officials have made significant progress to engage with key industry stakeholders on wild animals in circuses, and they also welcomed the continued work by officials to scope the possibility of a joint contingency plan on rendering capacity on the island of Ireland. It was also welcomed that officials met in February 2014 and that they continue to progress work to establish respective disease surveillance priorities with a view to agreeing all-island surveillance priorities.

The Council noted the continued efforts and progress that the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and DARD are making on the development of all-island cooperation in our respective rural development programmes for the period 2014 to 2020. We will be requiring our local action groups (LAGs) to cooperate with other LAGs through the LEADER element of the rural development programmes with the intention of sharing knowledge and delivering joint projects across the island. We will also be encouraging cooperation with other European LAGs on an east-west basis. In addition, Ministers welcomed the expected successful completion during 2014 of all six rural development projects that are being delivered

through the EU INTERREG cross-border programme.

Ministers also had the opportunity to discuss in some detail issues affecting the beef sector, including retailer specifications, pricing and North/South trade in cattle. Minister Coveney and I agreed on the need for increased transparency and communication in the supply chain and for all elements of the chain to work together to ensure a fair return for all. We also agreed to continue to work together in that area. The Council agreed to hold the next agriculture meeting in September 2014 in the Canal Stores building in Clones, the refurbishment of which has been funded as part of the EU INTERREG programme.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development):

I thank the Minister for her statement. Given that the Republic of Ireland Minister and, indeed, the Department down there have basically finalised their proposals for CAP in a way that means that they can then plan ahead for the future, why is it that our Minister in DARD fails miserably every time and is made to look bad in the eyes of the British Isles, considering that she has yet to bring her proposals on CAP to the Executive for ratification and agreement? Why, Minister, have you failed our people, our farming community and our businesses when it comes to CAP? When will you bring your details and proposals to the Executive?

Mrs O'Neill: One would be forgiven for thinking that there is an election on Thursday. However, I have strived very hard to make sure that we can clarify as much information as possible for the farming community. I absolutely accept that it is a time of massive change, and I absolutely accept that people are anxious about what it means for them individually as a farm business. So, I am very keen that we clarify the remaining issues. There are only a small number of issues to be clarified, but, that having been said, they are major issues.

As I have said previously in the House, we have a system of government here and a process to go through. We are actively going through it. We have a deadline of 1 August; however, I wish to make a decision on CAP reform and the remaining issues that are outstanding well in advance of that. I do not think that it is in anyone's interest to drag this out. So, the decisions that I take will be balanced and fair and will be reflective of the needs of all the farming community, not just a few. I am very conscious of that, and I will be very mindful of it when taking decisions. I hope to be able to

clarify the remaining issues as soon as possible.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her very transparent and comprehensive report. Minister, you mentioned in the report that discussions on the beef sector took place between the Ministers who were present. Can you give us more detail on those discussions?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, Minister Coveney and I discussed at length the issues that are facing the beef sector — issues that we are all very mindful of. We all share the concerns of the beef farmers around the considerable drop in prices that have been experienced recently. It is fair to say that we all want to see a very profitable and strong red-meat sector here in the North, and that can only be achieved if farmers receive a fair return for their produce. We are working together collectively, particularly around the changes that marts are trying to bring forward. We need to be a very strong voice, and a voice right across the island, in standing up for the farming community, because the only way that the sector will be sustainable and fruitful in the future is if farmers receive that fair price. As for my influence and what I can bring to bear, I have certainly made it very clear to the processors that I am absolutely on the side of the farmers with regard to those changes.

Minister Coveney and I discussed a number of issues around approaching the retailers directly and collectively, which, I think, would be key in moving forward. However, outside that, we can also provide practical support from my Department; for example, as part of the customer services element, DARD is trying to support farmers to meet the new requirements on on-farm residencies. The Department is trying to work with the farmers who need that information. Other things include helping and facilitating more cooperation and collaboration in the beef supply chains and looking towards how we can improve the sharing of information right across the island, and we are actively working on data systems to be able to do that. Collectively, we need to stand up for the beef sector, and we need to look towards the export markets and open up all the potential avenues that we have to make sure that we can achieve a fair price for the produce that we have.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister referred to joint cooperation between the Departments in the North and the South in relation to the rural development programme, and she also referred

to joint projects. What sort of joint projects are envisaged, and when does she hope to be in a position to tell us the total resource minded to her for the rural development programme?

Mrs O'Neill: The particular projects that I talked about are the six major rural development projects that we are taking forward. I can certainly provide the Member with the detail of all of those projects. However, suffice to say that they were very successful projects. The beauty about the rural development programme is that it is not the case that we are telling the farmers in border areas what their projects should be; they are coming forward with the ideas, and the rural development programme is the vehicle to allow that to happen, or to at least support projects to happen. The new programme and the types of projects that we will see on the ground will come from the bottom up, and that is key to LEADER; making sure that there is a bottom-up approach is at the heart of LEADER. As regards what comes forward, we have yet to see those applications. However, in looking to the new programme, areas are already thinking about ideas that they will have. We have had major consultation with regard to shaping the whole new rural development programme, and we are working with the stakeholders in designing the new programme. We will bring more detail in due course to make sure that we do not miss any opportunity when the new programme kicks in and that we can hit the ground running with everything in place. We are actively working on that at the moment.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement. She will recognise that our beef sector is going through extremely difficult times with many farmers very fearful for the future. Despite agreeing to work together with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, there is very little detail or specifics in the statement. What steps is the Minister taking, and will she progress a suckler scheme along the same lines as that introduced in the Republic? Mr Speaker, I declare an interest, as my husband is a beef farmer.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said to my colleague in reply to the previous question, we obviously all share the concerns of the beef sector at this time, particularly because of the considerable drop in price. We need to look at what we can do practically and the remit that I can take forward, because obviously pricing is a commercial matter and outside my control. However, we can work with the beef sector in key areas, particularly around practical support, trying to get efficiency on farms and how farmers

collectively can work together. There are a number of practical things that my Department is doing, particularly with regard to support around getting background detail and looking at how we can improve our data systems across the island so that we can make sure that there is free movement across the island, which obviously facilitates trade.

We had the recent opening of the Singapore market. One of the things that is very clearly set out in the 'Going for Growth' document is the fact that we need to look at the beef sector to see the immediate challenges and the longer-term challenges.

Some such longer-term challenges are in how we get into the extra markets that we are targeting. We are concentrating on China, particularly for pork. However, the Singapore market is opening up, and Russia is among quite a number of other markets. That is what we need to do in the longer term.

12.15 pm

Simon Coveney and I have discussed facilitating a start to the conversation on all-island trade and how we can collectively market what we have to offer: a clean, green image and high-quality produce. If you want something cheap, go elsewhere, because what we offer is high quality. We need really to target those markets, and we have agreed at official and ministerial level to work together to facilitate that discussion, so quite a lot is going on for the beef sector. Our budget falls far short of that of the Twenty-six Counties. That said, I want to prioritise the beef sector in the new rural development programme and look at what supports we can provide to it because that is the sector struggling most.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. Paragraph seven states:

"a ... document on plant health and pesticides was presented".

She went on to say that the Council noted that an all-Ireland conference on dieback had taken place. Will the Minister elaborate on where we are on the issue of the dieback debacle some time ago? Has dieback been overcome? Have lessons been learnt so that we will not have any such plant health problems in future?

Mrs O'Neill: Unfortunately, it is still a problem. At the conference, government and industry came together to talk about sharing experiences. We also looked towards other

countries that have been dealing with the disease. One guest speaker was from Norway, which is further down the line in tackling the disease than we are. It was very much an information-sharing and learning experience to look at what we are doing and whether we can do anything else or anything better.

The disease remains prevalent, and we are still at the stage of working to contain and eradicate it. It is a worrying disease, but our surveillance found only 12 new infections last year. That is encouraging, but we cannot be complacent. It is a serious disease that we need to tackle head-on. The beauty of the strategy that we have in place is that it is adaptable. As circumstances and conditions change, we can change our approach to tackling the disease.

Mr Storey: Paragraph four of the statement refers to:

"potential priorities for the agriculture sector"

and to a paper that will be presented to an NSMC meeting in institutional format. Will she tell us what the priorities are? Will she also end the feet dragging on CAP and answer the question posed by my colleague Mr Frew, the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture? What are the issues that she and her party are dragging their feet on? Why are they not giving an answer to the many thousands of farmers in Northern Ireland who, this morning, are in absolute despair because of the Minister's failure to deal with CAP reform?

Mrs O'Neill: It is interesting to see Mr Storey taking an interest in an NSMC agriculture statement today. You could be forgiven for thinking that there are elections on Thursday. So — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: I have made very clear to your colleague the CAP reform issues that we are dealing with. We have taken a number of key decisions to provide as much clarity as possible for the farming community. A small number of major issues have still to be dealt with, and we are working our way through them. There are quite a lot of challenges for us, particularly given that your party blocked the transfer of funding that would have been very useful for the farming sector.

There has been a lot of discussion about the beef sector this afternoon. Think of the supports that we could have put in place for the beef sector had we had sufficient rural

development programme funding and been able to transfer in just over £112 million. Think of the supports that we could have put in place for a suckler scheme. Many challenges are presented to me as a result of the actions by your party. However, I will still take the best decisions possible, support the industry where possible and make sure that the decisions are fair and balanced. These decisions are not about protecting the status quo; they are about protecting everybody, giving everybody a fair chance and providing supports for every farmer. I care about all farmers; not just a few.

Mr Rogers: Have any discussions taken place about joint live cattle exports on an all-Ireland basis?

Mrs O'Neill: That was not discussed at the meeting. The focus of the conversation was trade, and we looked at how we can use every opportunity to get into new markets. We talked about how markets are opening up to us, particularly Singapore recently, and also China. Our efforts are focused on certificates so that we can get into those markets.

Live exports are an ongoing issue, obviously, and dealt with in the Department and across the island. Free movement across the island not only is an aspiration but is something that we want to deliver on. We have a strategy, and EU law will come into place in 2015, which will be the vehicle for allowing free movement, including that of live cattle, across the island. So work is ongoing with live exports.

Mrs Overend: The Minister will know that there is huge potential in China. I am not talking about pig genetics, because I would have to declare an interest given that my husband is in China now promoting Northern Ireland pigs. I am referring to the pork-processing industry. There is a huge Chinese market for pork products, but the difficulty lies in being able to please the Chinese born-and-bred policy. Will the Minister continue to insist on working with the Republic of Ireland on that issue, or will she put Northern Ireland first and work with the rest of the United Kingdom to get Northern Irish pork products into China?

Mrs O'Neill: My record stands for itself. I have been to China twice, and we are actively pursuing the Chinese market. We are tackling all barriers to trade head-on. The Chinese are very particular about their requirements and what they wish to see. Chinese vets recently visited here to take a look at our practices and how we conduct our business.

There is no problem with promoting what we have to offer, which is fantastic produce. Are there barriers? Absolutely. If people want to market themselves as British or Irish, their doing so should be facilitated across the board. There is a barrier to trade because of the unique situation in which we find ourselves on this island. I want to make sure that we actively work on that not being a barrier.

Minister Coveney and I are working on new EU labelling law, which will come into effect next year. We need to be able to facilitate all companies getting into the markets that they want to get into, and we can come to an accommodation when we can meet EU requirements and create a label that will satisfy all companies.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the statement, although the content could be described as "rangy ribs".

Paragraph 8, which deals with animal welfare, is interesting. I assume, Minister, that that also addresses animal cruelty, which, unfortunately, persists on both sides of the border. Is she satisfied that more could be done on a cross-border basis to bring to an end the appalling cases of animal cruelty that we hear about from time to time?

Mrs O'Neill: We absolutely condemn all cases of animal cruelty and anybody involved in them. We have an all-island animal health and welfare strategy, which is not only about preventative work but about tackling issues when they occur. That work is ongoing, and paragraph 8 lists all the actions that have been taken forward since the last NSMC meeting. We are proactive in that area.

We have very strong legislation on animal cruelty. Disappointingly, recent sentencing has not matched the offences being dealt with, and there are issues with that. I have discussed the matter with the Minister of Justice, have written to the Lord Chief Justice about the sentencing and have said that I will look at the legislation to see whether there is any scope for improvement. Hopefully, that will satisfy everybody that we are actively being as strong as we possibly can with the legislation to tackle animal cruelty.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. Paragraph 10 refers to communication and transparency in the supply chain to ensure a fair return for all. Did she have any communications or conversations on the fines that are being imposed on beef

producers, which are based on the number of movements of cattle, and did she raise the issue of nomads?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, that was very much part of the conversation on the challenges that are facing the beef industry, and we are very concerned about it. I have met representatives of the local marts, who are also concerned, but they do not want to be involved in the conversation. It is unfortunate that those processors have decided to bring in such fines without consulting the farming industry. If we are serious about having a sustainable farming industry for the future, everybody in that supply chain needs to be treated equally. In this case, that was not the case.

Farmers took business decisions, bought cattle at a high price last autumn and are left now in a difficult situation because of these changes. I made my position clear to the processors. I met NIMEA and made sure that it is fully aware of my view. I am very much on the farmers' side on this issue and will continue to be. We need to be a strong voice for the farming industry, but, if we want a sustainable farming industry, everybody in that supply chain needs to be fairly treated. This is another instance when the farmer certainly was not.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her very useful statement. In paragraph 11, the Minister states that the next meeting will take place in September in the Canal Stores in Clones. The Minister will be well aware of proposals there to reopen the Ulster canal. When she is in Clones, will she have any intention of engaging with local representatives to hear the proposals for reopening the canal?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that I will take that opportunity when I am there.

Executive Committee Business

Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014

**Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise,
Trade and Investment):** I beg to move:

*That the draft Renewables Obligation
(Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 be
approved.*

This statutory rule is being made under powers contained in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that this order must be laid in draft for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

The changes that I bring forward in the draft order relate to the Northern Ireland renewables obligation, or NIRO, as it is more commonly known. The NIRO is the main way in which we incentivise the deployment of renewable electricity generation such as wind and solar. Our aim is to achieve the Executive's target of 40% of electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020. I am glad to say that we are on track to deliver on our interim target of 20% by 2015.

Following consultation, this order introduces changes to the NIRO that are intended to ensure that it continues to bring forward investment in renewables at least cost to the consumer, whilst taking account of wider sustainability matters. We made a number of changes to renewables obligation certificate (ROC) levels in the past. Renewable energy policy must continue to respond to changes in technology and costs to meet the needs of Northern Ireland. This order introduces two main changes to the NIRO.

First, and unique to Northern Ireland, it provides a small increase in renewables obligation certificate support levels for ground-mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) generating stations above 250 kilowatts. In line with the renewables obligation in Great Britain, the order also introduces increased sustainability criteria for electricity generated from biomass.

Last year, as part of UK-wide changes, we introduced revised ROC banding support levels for ground-mounted and building-mounted solar PV generating stations above 250 kilowatts. Following the introduction of those new ROC

levels in May 2013, representations were made by the large-scale solar industry seeking a review of them. The evidence presented by the industry suggested that the ROC banding levels for ground-mounted solar PV above 250 kilowatts up to March 2017 would not realise deployment in Northern Ireland and that a different approach from Great Britain was needed to encourage investment.

Large-scale solar PV is a mature and established renewable sector in Great Britain, where it has witnessed significant growth in recent times, but it has no presence in Northern Ireland. In fact, to date, we have no individual solar PV installations above 50 kilowatts. Solar technology continues to improve and costs reduce. These advances make Northern Ireland a more credible location for large-scale solar.

In order to stimulate investment, we need to make relatively small adjustments to the ROC support to take account of our lower solar irradiation levels, which can be up to 30% less than some regions of the south of England. I do not think that comes as any surprise to anybody in the House. The Assembly approved similar interventions in the past. In 2011, for example, higher ROC levels were introduced for anaerobic digestion because we recognised the potential offered by that technology.

Large-scale solar, if introduced in a responsible way, offers real benefits. It will expand our overall mix of renewable energy technologies and contribute to a cleaner, greener energy sector in Northern Ireland.

12.30 pm

Of course, there are economic benefits too. Land is leased for development and local companies benefit from construction and ongoing operation and maintenance contracts.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment spent some time scrutinising the proposals to increase support for large-scale solar. A key concern was that the higher ROC levels proposed were to take account of perceived inefficiencies in the planning and grid connection procedures. I want to assure Members that that was not the case. The ROC levels in this order reduce through depression on an annual basis. That is only right because it reflects a continuing reduction in technology costs. However, we are setting depression at a different rate to Great Britain, to reflect not only our lower solar levels but our different planning and grid connection timescales. Our timescales

are longer. That is not a criticism; it is merely a fact. From 1 June, ground-mounted solar PV above 250 kilowatts will receive 1.6 ROCs per megawatt hour, reducing to 1.5 ROCs in 2015-16 for new applicants, and 1.4 ROCs in 2016-17.

I note the Committee's other concern, namely that the higher ROC levels we are introducing might limit the number of developers who can avail themselves of them and could create a monopoly. ROCs are set at a level that is sufficient to bring forward deployment at least cost to the consumer. That is a fine balancing act, and I accept that the new levels might not be high enough for all developers, but that is a matter for the market. If we were to set an even higher ROC level to meet the requirements of every developer, we would be overcompensating the majority of deployment.

Members may be interested to know that a consultation is under way in Great Britain that proposes to cease support under the renewables obligations there for large-scale ground-mounted solar PV generation above 5 megawatts. Instead, those projects will have to bid for support under the new contracts for difference mechanism and perhaps not all will be successful. In practice, I anticipate limited overall deployment of large-scale solar in the very short term.

I turn to the second issue, namely biomass sustainability requirements, which comprise the majority of the order and mirror those made in Great Britain. The order strengthens the reporting requirements and introduces audit requirements for solid biomass under the NIRO. That is designed to ensure that biomass material is sourced responsibly and in a way that minimises or eliminates adverse impacts. There is no merit in supporting renewables at the point of generation if the fuel used has an adverse environmental impact.

The order amends the information that is to be provided to the accrediting body, Ofgem, by all stations generating over 50 kilowatts that use solid biomass and/or biogas. That includes the introduction of a timber standard, which is focused on sourcing wood from legal and sustainable sources, and a tighter greenhouse gas threshold for dedicated biomass stations that were accredited after 1 April 2013. It also creates a new requirement for generating stations of 1 megawatt and above to provide an independent sustainability audit report for solid and gaseous biomass, which will report against greenhouse gases, land criteria and the timber standard. Those reporting and audit requirements will enable generators to become

familiar with the sustainability criteria before the introduction of the further amendments that will be made next year to make compliance with the sustainability criteria mandatory for generating stations of 1 megawatt and above.

The order also refers to the latest combined heat and power quality assurance standard, which has been tightened to reflect improvements in the efficiency of such schemes.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, the amendments contained in the order will continue to support achievement of the Executive's renewables targets in a sustainable manner and, importantly, at least cost to the consumer.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the introduction of this order. I think it important that we, as an Assembly, are flexible and can change in response to technological advances, as the Minister said, as well as being able to react to other market changes to ensure that a fair and appropriate level of incentivisation is provided to developers, and also to help ensure that we can meet the ambitious and challenging targets set out in the strategic energy framework.

It is also important that we ensure that developers are not making an excessive level of profit, as could have been the case if these changes did not take place. When we move to the changes that the Minister proposes for 2017, with feed-in tariffs and contracts for difference, the chances of such profiteering will be greatly reduced.

The Committee, in gathering evidence, found it difficult to get a breakdown of financial and other information that would have allowed us, as a scrutiny Committee, to make an informed decision on this piece of legislation. I still do not think that we have been given the level of detail that we requested, but the Committee's primary concerns, which I shared, have been met. Hopefully, that will not happen again and we can perform the level of scrutiny that we, as Committee members, want to perform and can have the appropriate level of insight into particular areas. I understand that this is a complex commercial issue, but Committee members should receive the information they are looking for.

The proposed specific levels of incentivisation offered, on which there is agreement, probably strike the right balance. Having looked at some of these figures in detail, I believe that a 7% return on investment is more than appropriate and more than adequate to attract private

investors. As an electricity customer and a representative of electricity customers, I think that a return of around 10% plus inflation is excessive and we would not be happy to endorse it. The Minister's proposals, therefore, strike the right balance.

The Committee also had to consider issues around the length of time it takes for planning applications to go through and the fact that grid connections have to be applied for separately. The fact that these cannot be applied for together caused the Committee concern and caused me concern as a Committee member.

I am grateful to those who came to the Committee to educate us better about what we were talking about. I am happy to support the Minister's order.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the SL1 brought forward by the Minister. The increased ROC support for ground-mounted solar PV generating stations above 250 kilowatts is welcome and could open up real opportunities for further investment in this important sector.

The Committee considered these issues extensively, taking evidence from a wide range of stakeholders involved in the renewables sector. It supports the proposed increase in the ROCs this year to 1.6 kilowatts per megawatt, reducing to 1.5 kilowatts next year and 1.4 kilowatts in the third year, with a commitment by the Department, which we obviously appreciate, for a review after 12 months.

Many issues remain, one in particular being the cost of connections for such PV units into the grid. The Committee looked at this issue extensively in its recent cost of energy report. Other issues include the length of time taken for planning permission. Northern Ireland is different to the rest of the UK, because NIE will not engage in full negotiations with applicants until they receive full planning permission. This issue needs to be reviewed and there is a strong argument that the processes should run in parallel, thereby reducing the lead-in time for such project development. I welcome this SL1.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as an moladh seo a thabhairt os ár gcomhair. I thank the Minister for bringing the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order before the Assembly. My apologies for running late; I thought I was, in fact, 10 minutes early, but there you are. My apologies to the Minister as well; she will maybe let me off on this occasion.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment recognises the importance of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation and its impact on the development of large and small-scale renewable energy installations. The Committee has closely followed its evolution through the Renewables Obligation Order (NI) 2009 and its amendments in 2010, 2011 and 2013.

It is essential that appropriate levels of support are offered to companies in order to meet the renewable energy targets that the Department has set in the strategic energy framework. As the Committee stated in its 'Report on the Committee's Review into Electricity Policy Part One: Security of Electricity Supply', it is important that Northern Ireland has an energy mix in order to address intermittency issues and security of supply. However, it is equally important that renewable generation is not over-incentivised, so as to ensure that full value is achieved from the public purse.

The Committee considered the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 at SL1 stage on 30 January 2014 and agreed to explore further the reasons for increasing ROC support levels for ground-mounted solar PV generating stations with an installed capacity above 250 kilowatts.

The Committee welcomes the fact that the Department worked closely with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and specialist advisers on considering ROC levels in order to help to kick-start an industry which currently has no presence in Northern Ireland — albeit a significant planning approval has been granted recently — whilst also ensuring that the cost to the consumer is kept to a minimum. The Committee agrees that that is an important measure, especially considering the Department's estimate of £50 million of investment into Northern Ireland by the large-scale solar industry.

The Committee has two main concerns with the statutory rule (SR). First, it is not lower irradiance levels but inefficiency in the planning and grid connection process that has made Northern Ireland unattractive to the large-scale solar industry and resulted in compensation measures being needed in order to create a level playing field with England, Scotland and Wales. In GB, planning and grid connection applications are run in parallel, whereas, in Northern Ireland, NIE will not accept grid connection applications until planning is approved. The Committee has heard evidence that that is causing costly and lengthy

processes. On top of that, as we all know, the grid is in significant need of an upgrade.

The Committee looks forward to addressing those issues in the third and final part of its electricity review, which will concentrate on grid connections for renewable energy. The Committee sought and received confirmation from the Department that the NIRO will be reviewed in 12 months' time. That will allow a review of the number and type of applications by companies as well as the cost of PV panels, which is a relevant factor in deciding ROC levels.

Secondly, the Committee was concerned that the ROC support levels could potentially create a monopoly. The Committee heard from the largest ground-mounted solar PV company in the UK that it was satisfied that the margin that the proposals would provide would be sufficient to attract investment for it, but from another that the proposed ROC levels would not provide an adequate rate of return for investors and could result in several of its projects not being viable. The issue of a monopoly for the biggest firms created an issue for the Committee. Hopefully, that will be addressed, and I am sure that the Minister will keep a close watch on that.

The Committee considered the SR at its meeting on 1 May. It agreed to support the proposals, provided that the two issues I have highlighted are addressed. The Committee is therefore content that the amendments proposed are appropriate and agrees that the Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: I thank those who have contributed to the debate. A few issues have been raised. With regard to Mr Flanagan's point about financial information, I think that he will accept that the information that was shared was third-hand information in so far as it was provided by the developers and passed through the Department to the Committee. I suppose, and I think that he recognises, that some of their information will be commercial in confidence and that they will not want to share it publicly. However, I take his point on that. We were simply facilitating the information coming from the developers.

I know that the Committee spent a long time looking at grid connection and planning issues. I hope that the issue of planning will be raised directly with the Minister of the Environment because, as Members will know, planning in respect of grid connections does not sit with me. I know that the Committee is looking at the

whole issue of grid connections and their cost. I look forward to that report.

I think that it is right to say that this is very much a balancing act with regard to incentivisation. Thus far, we have been unable to attract any large-scale solar companies here to the Northern Ireland market. I hope that this will attract some installations, but at least cost. That is the important point: at all times, we must have that balance in our minds so that we do not cost consumers any more money than is absolutely necessary.

12.45 pm

Mr Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Well done, Sammy. I will give way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I apologise that I was not in the Chamber, although I was listening intently from the Gallery.

The Minister hits on an important point about costs to consumers, because, although there is no cost to the public purse, renewables obligations mean that higher-priced electricity has to be bought, and that is paid for by the consumer. Is she happy that the way in which she is reducing the ROCs over the period takes into consideration the very rapid improvements in technology that are occurring in the solar industry? Moreover, is she happy that she is not keeping the ROCs at too high a level, given that there are huge efficiencies to be made from the efficiency of the panels themselves and in the cost of the panels that people will be purchasing for that type of electricity generation?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am satisfied that we have been able to take those matters into account. Given that we have not as yet had a solar installation of this magnitude in Northern Ireland, we need to incentivise it. Furthermore, Northern Ireland has 30% less sun — that comes as no surprise to anybody in the Chamber — than south-east England, which is where most of the solar installations have taken place thus far.

I think that we have got the balance right between overcompensation to developers and costs to consumers, and it is a fine balance, as I think the House recognises. I hope that the measures will ensure that the NIRO continues to adapt to changes in the renewable sectors whilst taking into account and balancing

consumer need and wider sustainability concerns. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. The next business in the Order Paper is Question Time. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 1.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.47 pm.

On resuming —

1.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 14 have been withdrawn.

Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

1. **Mr Swann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with the Minister of Education on the role that their previously proposed peace building and conflict resolution centre at the Maze/Long Kesh site would have in the revised curriculum. (AQO 6129/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): None.

Mr Swann: I thank the First Minister for his brief answer. In the past, he quoted favourably in the House from the Colliers market research document on the peace centre. What is his opinion of the section that makes clear that the Education and Training Inspectorate thinks that the peace centre, including the Maze prison hospital, would be an ideal place for six-year-olds to visit as part of the personal development and mutual understanding section of Key Stage 1 of the revised curriculum?

Mr P Robinson: Neither the deputy First Minister nor I had any conversation with Colliers. They, I think, based that largely on the Ulster Unionist-led master plan, which refers directly to the involvement of children and young people in a centre that the Ulster Unionist party endorsed being within the listed buildings.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the First Minister for his answers so far. Does he recognise that a balanced narrative on such a centre at that location would be a powerful tool to educate young people about the errors and horrors of the past and would contribute to peace and reconciliation in the future?

Mr P Robinson: Leaving aside the issue of the peace centre, I think it essential that, as part of

our Together: Building an United Community, there is education — that education should happen in schools — about our past, indicating the folly of terrorism, its impact on the lives of tens of thousands of people and the need to support democratic institutions and the democratic way forward.

Mr Spratt: I thank the First Minister for his answers so far. When the UUP was leading the group on Maze/Long Kesh, was it not in its proposal that the peace centre and the listed buildings would be part and parcel of one building? Did they not propose that young people could use that as a centre in the future?

Mr P Robinson: This is part of the revisionism that the Ulster Unionist Party has been engaging in. It chaired the group that put forward the master plan, which its leader publicly endorsed. That master plan had at its heart the peace centre being within the curtilage of the listed buildings. It also indicated that the listed buildings would be used as part of a tour and that there should be educational elements within it. So, it ill becomes any of them to take a report, which was not asked for by the deputy First Minister or me and not approved by us after it was conducted, and try to indicate, by way of smear, that, somehow, this was the thinking of OFMDFM.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as a fhreagraí. I thank the First Minister for his answers to date. Be it the first draft of the first master plan or the most recent draft, the unique selling point consistently and throughout was one of moving from conflict to peace to prosperity. Does the First Minister agree that, without that unique selling point, the ability to promote and market the rest of the site is severely undermined?

Mr P Robinson: I think that there are very few of us who, if we went to the west coast of the United States, would not go to Alcatraz. Very few of us have not been to one of the facilities used by the Nazis. All those places have a historical content. In the context of Northern Ireland, it is vital that, if you are to have a peace centre, it does not become a cause of division itself. That is why we always judged it essential that any such facility must have broad support from both sections of our community, particularly the victims of the Troubles.

International Investment

2. **Mr Storey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the

impact of their recent overseas investment visits. (AQO 6130/11-15)

9. Mr Dunne asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what impact the international relations strategy has had to date, particularly in helping to attract foreign direct investment. (AQO 6137/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 9 together.

A key focus of the Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15 is to grow the economy. We are committed to bringing investment, jobs, tourists, new skills and best practice into Northern Ireland by promoting local skills and developing mutually beneficial relationships with targeted countries, regions and international organisations. Securing international projects requires long-term relationship building and raising awareness of the many advantages of investing in Northern Ireland.

We will continue to be proactive in targeting countries and organisations in an effort to secure trade and investment opportunities. The Executive's international relations strategy complements and coordinates the work of Departments, agencies and other organisations. It also builds on the significant international relations activity in recent years associated with our successful hosting of the G8 summit, the World Police and Fire Games, the MTV Europe music awards, the UK City of Culture, the Global India conference, the Irish Open and, most recently, the hugely successful Giro d'Italia.

Already, our international engagement during the past year has generated a number of significant benefits. I make no apology for our commitment to promote economic growth in Northern Ireland and for devoting so much of our time at home and on our international visits to meeting potential investors. That strategy has proved hugely successful, and we remain confident that it will continue to produce positive dividends in the years to come.

Mr Storey: I thank the First Minister for his answer. On the back of the success of international engagement, will he make a comment, particularly on Invest Northern Ireland's announcement last week on its performance for the past financial year and its contribution to securing the prosperity of this sector?

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful that the Member gives me an opportunity to congratulate Invest Northern Ireland and its chief executive, Alastair Hamilton, on its successes. The problem for Invest Northern Ireland is that, once it raises the bar and we look at targets for future years, they go up as well.

Invest Northern Ireland's performance brought in a total of 10,800 new jobs, which is 49% up on last year. It brought in 6,040 new local jobs, which is 34% up on last year, and 4,760 external jobs, which is 75% up on last year. Incidentally, 73% of rebalancing jobs were above the private sector median salary. It brought in £1.09 billion of investment, which is 83% up on last year. That brings in total wages and salaries of £190 million. It has made 5,249 offers of support, 94% of which were for local businesses, and 2,995 businesses have been supported, which is up 15%. Those of us who look at the Programme for Government know that we set four-year targets. Invest Northern Ireland, in a number of those categories, has already exceeded those targets after three years.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answers today. When does he anticipate the Executive being in a position to open an office in Beijing?

Mr P Robinson: If everything goes to plan, the deputy First Minister and I are scheduled to be in China in November for the opening of that office. That is hugely significant. Those of us who have been at the Balmoral Show over the past week will have heard from a number of farmers and producers about the importance of getting our produce out to China and the massive change that that could make to business in Northern Ireland. A presence in Beijing would be important as it is the political capital of China.

We have met Chinese officials on several occasions. Madam Liu Yandong's visit to Northern Ireland, and our meeting with her during our visit to China, indicate that, from a government perspective, they are very keen to help, and are supportive of, Northern Ireland and working with us. I hope that the opening of the new office will give us a strong base from which we can grow our economy here.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers. Minister, what work is being done collaboratively with the universities here to ensure that, when you make trips abroad with a view to attracting foreign direct investment (FDI)

in particular, there are tailor-made packages to boost opportunities for graduates from those universities?

Mr P Robinson: I assure the Member that we have the best relationship with the universities. That is led largely by Stephen Farry in DEL, and it is an integral part of the package when we are negotiating. If we know how many jobs companies will bring to Northern Ireland and which skills are required, the Assured Skills project will ensure that we have those skills available when they come.

The universities have been helpful not just in making sure that we have people with the necessary skills but have been very supportive in providing research and development. Quite uniquely, we have a three-pronged approach in Northern Ireland whereby people in business can have a good relationship with the universities and government, and business, as a central part, works with them as well. All that is part of the package. We encourage companies to come to Northern Ireland on the basis that we have the skills here and can produce the people when they need them.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree with the First Minister about Invest NI's excellent performance in delivering on the number of jobs not only promoted but created. Given the Programme for Government commitment to not only grow the economy but tackle disadvantage, would the First Minister support a stipulation on Invest NI that all jobs created through it, or with grant funding, should be paid at the living wage?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, we are covered by United Kingdom legislation on the minimum wage. I very much encourage companies coming to Northern Ireland to offer jobs with high salaries. I indicated that three quarters of those that come to Northern Ireland provide us with jobs that are above the private sector median, so they are better paid jobs. Of course, indigenous companies also create jobs for the Northern Ireland economy.

The more productive that companies are, the more they can pay in salaries. I think that it is a virtuous circle, because the more that staff are paid, the harder they will work and the more commitment they will give to a company.

Delivering Social Change

3. **Mr McMullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the proposals for stakeholder engagement with the children and

young people's sector under Delivering Social Change. (AQO 6131/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: I will ask my colleague junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Delivering Social Change aims to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all age groups and an improvement in children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities. Clearly, Delivering Social Change is not something that the Executive can deliver on their own. We recognise that it will involve a partnership approach to help make change happen.

Our Department hosted stakeholder engagement events in June and October 2012, with participation from children's sector organisations. Those events led to the development of the children and young persons' early action paper, which identified the key priorities to be taken forward, and those informed the signature programmes. Another stakeholder engagement event was held in June 2013.

This January, we launched a consultation document, 'Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People', building on the work commissioned from the National Children's Bureau on an outcomes framework, which sets out a partnership approach to tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people.

We held six public consultation events, some of which were hosted by the children's sector, including Action for Children in Ballymena and the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership in Armagh, as well as numerous consultative events with stakeholders such as Barnardo's Sixth Sense group, the Child Poverty Alliance and the Rural Community Network. A new strategy will be laid in the Assembly shortly, which will set out a framework to include ongoing engagement with the children's sector and roles for the Commissioner for Children and Young People and children's sector organisations in the further development, delivery and, of course, monitoring of that work.

1.15 pm

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the junior Minister for his comprehensive answer. Does he accept that the children and young

people's strategic partnership has been working within an indicator framework for quite some time? Can he give assurances that that will be part of any future delivery of Delivering Social Change?

Mr Bell: We are always looking towards the indicators. However, what I particularly like about the outcomes model is that we are measuring ourselves against results. We know what the evidence base is, and the children's strategic partnership has given us the knowledge base and evidence to inform what we need to do. It is important that, in OFMDFM, we measure ourselves against the results that we actually achieve. That is why I find the outcomes approach the most effective. It is about looking at the evidence, taking best practice and then considering the outcomes that are achieved. As we monitor progress, we will refine and review those outcomes as we go along.

Mrs Hale: I thank the junior Minister for his answers. Will he indicate what advances have been achieved in equipping children with the best educational start in life?

Mr Bell: If a child has the best educational start in life, not only can they lift themselves out of poverty but, often, they can have a significant impact on their family. The key part of that is literacy and numeracy. We specifically targeted young people who were experiencing difficulty and falling just below the mark in literacy and numeracy. As a result of a programme in literacy and numeracy, over 223 teachers are now in post, providing additional teaching support to children and young people who are most at risk of underachieving in English and maths at critical stages of their education.

The signature programme also provides recently graduated teachers with valuable experience. Benefiting from that programme are 125 primary schools and 142 post-primary schools, including 61 controlled primary schools and 52 controlled post-primary schools. It is encouraging that schools are already beginning to see a positive impact from that initiative. They are seeing increased pupil confidence and pupils progressing and improving. That is already evident within that specific target group. The most encouraging thing that I have seen is an increase in scores in sample questions. Attainment of a grade C in maths in the January 2014 examination showed progress and improvement. The additional teaching and input is working, and we hope that that flows through to the exams that those young people take later in life.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. The Minister outlined the process for monitoring and measuring. Will he detail how Delivering Social Change will help early years intervention in socially deprived areas?

Mr Bell: Childcare is one of the most critical issues in socially deprived areas. In the past, before we put the Bright Start programme in place — there is a question on this later so I will not give the full answer — many families told us that the big difficulty for people re-entering the workforce, particularly young women, was the cost of childcare. We know that, when we get childcare right and have it at an appropriate standard as evidenced by the professionals in the field, such as the early years partnership, that young person develops their skills and the family is freed up.

The difficulty was that childcare had to be flexible and affordable. If you are starting out having to clear a £500 bill for childcare for a month, it ruins many people's prospects of re-entering the labour market. So, we set out a programme to make it flexible, because hours change, particularly for young women re-entering the labour market on flexible contracts. The childcare, therefore, had to be flexible. It also had to be affordable. We used a social enterprise model, which is incredibly exciting. It was not just about minding children to allow people to go out. We evidenced it against the standards of good practice that are already in place, so that the child gets a wonderful opportunity through their childcare. That childcare is delivering with respect to their relationship, educational and social skills. In many cases, it is giving those children a hand up regarding their educational performance.

Mr Beggs: The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People is tasked with looking after the interests of our children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable. Can the junior Minister advise how OFMDFM has engaged actively with the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner on designing the draft strategy and consultation plan?

Mr Bell: I cannot recall just how many meetings both junior Minister McCann and I have had in the recent period; at least three spring to mind. The Children's Commissioner operates, as she should, as a critical friend. We have looked at all the issues. At the last stage of the consultation event, which both junior Minister McCann and I attended, the speaker was the Children's Commissioner. We have had constructive engagement with the Northern

Ireland Children's Commissioner both formally and informally in private meetings in our offices. We have used the evidence base that the commission has. We have talked to its researchers. We have talked to the heads of office in each of its fields. As a result, we are, as I said, already seeing positive results in literacy and numeracy, with children attaining where previously they had not.

International Relations Strategy

4. **Mr Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their role in attracting international events to Northern Ireland, given their Department's responsibility for the international relations strategy. (AQO 6132/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: The Executive's international relations strategy provides the opportunity to coordinate international work across Departments, their agencies and with other organisations. This includes identifying opportunities for events that promote a positive image of Northern Ireland internationally and taking forward ideas generated from our discussions with visiting international representatives. This work has included Northern Ireland hosting a number of significant and hugely successful sporting, music and cultural events and securing high level visits from international leaders, including the G8 summit, and visits from the Chinese Vice-Premier Madam Liu Yandong, Prime Minister Abe of Japan and the former Prime Minister of Libya.

I want to take this opportunity to highlight the incredible success of the Giro d'Italia. Everyone in Northern Ireland embraced the excitement and spectacle of the event, and people were very active participants. All those involved in bringing the Giro d'Italia to Northern Ireland and those who selflessly volunteered throughout the route, on occasions in the face of some inclement Northern Ireland weather, should be justifiably proud of what they achieved.

We, as an Executive, acknowledge that, collectively, we need to build on this success. As Ministers with specific responsibility for international relations, the deputy First Minister and I will refocus our efforts to bring more successful events and positive international activities to Northern Ireland in the future. I am confident that we can build on the legacy of the Giro and continue to establish Northern Ireland as a venue capable of successfully hosting world class events.

Mr Anderson: I thank the First Minister for that response. He referred to the recent success of the Giro d'Italia, which was such a great promotion of Northern Ireland. Will the First Minister comment on the possibility of bringing other major events such as the Tour de France and the Open to Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: Without going into specific events, work is in progress on a number of key events that we are very keen to bring to Northern Ireland. As I indicated, if you provide the people of Northern Ireland with a quality event, they will turn out. I was pleased that the Irish Open in Portrush, again in spite of Northern Ireland-style weather, produced the largest attendance of any event on the European Tour. I am sure that many of you have watched the further legs of the Giro d'Italia as it has gone back to Italy. The best turnout that the Giro d'Italia has had thus far was in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the First Minister would agree that one of the most successful international events has just finished in the triangle area of Coleraine. Sadly, two riders, Simon Andrews and Frank Petricola, are fighting for their lives in Royal Victoria Hospital. Will the Minister consider engaging with the Minister for Regional Development to see how safety can be improved on this course to ensure the longevity of this very important event?

Mr P Robinson: I agree with the Member. The North West 200 has played a very significant role in attracting visitors to Northern Ireland and providing a real spectacle for local people. I can say to him that I am ahead of him, because the Minister for Regional Development and I were both up at the North West 200 on Saturday. We have had some discussions with the organisers as well. For them, the issue of safety is a continual one. They had some new features. Indeed, some of those features — the kerb protectors — were of significant help when it came to the first accident that occurred there. If those had not been there, it would have been many times worse. So, it must be an ongoing process of making sure that the race is as safe as it possibly can be. Having been there, I have to say that the speeds are more than I could endure. I could not cycle that fast. Even in the rain, the public were filling the stands and the route, and the organisers were indicating that crowds were standing in areas in which they had never stood before. They expected it to be a larger turnout than in previous years. Coleraine Borough Council, of course, plays a

very significant role in the preparation and organisation of that event.

Mr Kinahan: To be specific, would the First Minister support Barry McGuigan if he sought to support bringing Carl Frampton's fight here to Belfast?

Mr P Robinson: I have met both Barry McGuigan and Carl Frampton, and I very much support his ability to bring events to Northern Ireland. I see Carl Frampton as a future world champion. When he gets into that position, he will be able to dictate where his events will be. At this stage, it is a matter of negotiation, and we will provide any support or use any influence that any of us have to assist Barry McGuigan in bringing it to Northern Ireland. You can be absolutely certain that there will be very strong support from the local boxing community for such an event.

Childcare: Budget Allocation

5. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why they have not allocated all of the £12m budget for childcare for 2011-15. (AQO 6133/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell: The Member is referring to the £12 million to support the development of the childcare strategy. I am pleased that, last year, we published the Bright Start strategic framework and its 15 key first actions. Not only will these actions fully utilise the £12 million but we are, in fact, projected to spend £15 million to £17 million. We have already received high levels of interest and applications to the grant scheme.

The full Bright Start childcare strategy is under active development with a view to publication in March 2015. The 15 key first actions launched in September last year are intended to support and inform this process of development. The most ambitious of the key first actions aim to create or sustain up to 7,000 school-age childcare places. Some evidence suggests that there is a one in four chance of getting a place if you are under three to four years of age whereas, when the child gets to school age, those numbers multiply sometimes up to a one in 19 chance of getting a school-age childcare place.

We have some wonderful schools and some excellent school estates, and I know that in my

area of Strangford there is particular interest in developing school-age childcare because of the need that has been identified. Obviously, not having to transport children off site and everything else works for the parent and delivers for the child. The Bright Start school-age childcare grant scheme launched in March of this year to deliver these places over the next three and a half years.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. That concludes oral questions to the First Minister. We now move to topical questions to the First Minister.

1.30 pm

Sectarian/Racist/Hate-crime Attacks

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the OFMDFM strategy and any wider Executive strategy to deal with sectarian, racist and hate-crime attacks, especially in light of recent incidents, particularly in east Belfast. (AQT 1121/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Can I deal with the premise on which the question is based, and the phrase "particularly in east Belfast"? That comment has been made by the deputy First Minister and many people in the press. It appears that their GPS needs to be recalibrated, because the official statistics show that the area where most of the racist —

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr P Robinson: — attacks are occurring in south Belfast. After that comes north Belfast and then east Belfast. However, I am sure that the Member will agree with me that, no matter whether in north, south, east or west Belfast, they are to be deplored and condemned on every possible occasion. Support needs to be given to those who have been involved, and I encourage people in local communities to continue to give the support that they have been giving to people who are attacked, whether that be a racist attack or a sectarian attack. Anyone who has information should give that information to the PSNI so that people can be questioned, charged and convicted of those offences, no matter what organisation is involved, or whether indeed the people involved are in any organisation, including the UVF, which the police indicated was involved in some.

I quote from the PSNI statement, which specifically indicated:

"Given the range of motivations for racist hate crime across the city, it is too complex an issue for one-dimensional assessments."

However, all of us in the Chamber, I hope, will condemn all those who are involved in racist attacks. Those attacks are on people who have come to make a contribution to our society. Many of them are indispensable because of the work that they carry out, and many have been our allies in difficult times in the past.

Mr Boylan: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Will he provide any financial support for any of those people who have suffered, should they need to be rehoused or anything else?

Mr P Robinson: On rehousing and other issues, I trust that we can engage those who are responsible in the Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive. I know that the deputy First Minister and I will do anything that we can to give assistance. We, of course, have been working on the strategy dealing with race. It is part of the overall ambit that includes good relations in Northern Ireland. Whether it is through funding, if that is required, or whether it is by providing an overall strategy, the deputy first Minister and I will not be found wanting.

Peace Dividend

2. **Mr Byrne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the negotiations that will take place with the Treasury on the upcoming comprehensive spending review to ensure that the promised post-2007 peace dividend financial package will be realised. (AQT 1122/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: We had a very strong commitment from the Labour Administration about what the prospects would be and the peace dividend that would transpire. Regrettably, over the subsequent years, there has been a very significant reduction in the funding available to us, and I recognise that that is the result of the worldwide recession. However, it is becoming even more difficult now because, although much of the funding remains the same, it is moving more from revenue to capital, and that means that programmes that were aimed at helping those most in need have to be readdressed as a result of the shortfalls that exist.

We have a difficulty with the comprehensive spending review, in that it spans the period and lifetime of this Executive. However, the

Finance Minister has been engaging with the Treasury on all the issues. I have to say that, before we ever get to the comprehensive spending review, the Finance Minister is scratching his head as a result of the difficulties encountered in making our Budget last across the existing period. Hard decisions will have to be taken by the Executive to ensure that we live within the limits of the funds available to us.

Mr Byrne: I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive answer. Given the legacy of the lack of capital investment in infrastructure in the past, does he accept that it is incumbent on the Executive jointly, through the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, to make a special case to make sure that some of the capital projects, including the A5, do not fall off the table?

Mr P Robinson: The amount of capital expenditure has increased to £1.6 billion. At the same time, I think that it needs to be said that, when we came in as a devolved institution, we almost doubled the amount of capital expenditure that was there when direct rule was responsible.

The A5 was not a matter that related to our ability to provide the funds. We had assigned the funds for that project. The project was held back in the first instance because the Government of the Irish Republic were unable to meet the commitment that they had made to us to pay for, effectively, half the road. That meant that we had to readdress how we would use our funds.

We agreed the parts of the road that we would go ahead with, and the scheme then got tied up in legal issues arising from a judicial review. The Executive are still committed to the scheme, but we are left very much in the hands of DRD being able to get the necessary approvals through.

Racist Attacks: East Belfast

3. **Mr Craig** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the deputy First Minister's comments during Question Time last week, when he attacked unionist leaders for not denouncing racist attacks in east Belfast, whether the DUP leader, the First Minister, would like to outline what actions were taken by unionism at that time and his views on the issues. (AQT 1123/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Unionist leaders — I am not just talking about my party, because the position is the same as far as other unionist

leaders are concerned — have all opposed racist attacks, and they will continue to do so. I already indicated that there has been something of an attempt to demonise east Belfast by indicating that it is somehow the hotbed of racist attacks, even though south Belfast and north Belfast have worse figures for crimes and incidences of racist attacks.

However, it gives me the opportunity, once again, to condemn all those who are involved in such attacks. They are not representative of our community in Northern Ireland. We are a welcoming place; we encourage people from other areas to come here to contribute to and build up our economy. We give full support to the PSNI in dealing with this issue, and people should give information if they have it.

Mr Craig: Unionist leaders were also accused of cowardice of the worst kind around this issue. Will the First Minister not only outline his thoughts on that but ask all Members to condemn attacks on Orange halls, such as the attack on Fourscore, which took place this week?

Mr P Robinson: On the latter point, I am sure that they will all do so, and do so very willingly. As far as the attack on unionist leaders is concerned, I do not think that the Member need concern himself too much. I think that it was a synthetic attack; it was an attempt to deflect attention from the conditional support that the deputy First Minister had indicated to the PSNI and from the focus that there had been on the terrorist past of those involved in Sinn Féin.

However, I will tell him what I do believe to be cowardice of the worst kind. It involves those who shoot people in the back and have done so in the past. It is the cowardice of those who strap individuals to a vehicle and then put a bomb in it. It is the cowardice of those who take out a young woman — a widow with 10 children — from the midst of her family, take her away and torture her, tie her hands behind her back and then shoot her in the back of the head. That is cowardice of the worst kind.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. Oliver McMullan — order.

Mr P Robinson: So, there is a definition that is required. Among the smiles that we are getting from those on the Benches on the other side, I wonder whether any of those Members are prepared to put up their hand and indicate that the IRA has been involved in cowardice of the worst kind. Not one, Mr Speaker, would say

that those who tied a bomb to a window of the La Mon House Hotel — a bomb that had a napalm-style effect on those who had gone to enjoy a dinner for the Collie Club — showed cowardice of the worst kind. Planting a bomb at a Remembrance Day service in Enniskillen was cowardice of the worst kind. Stopping a vehicle of workmen who were returning home at Kingsmills was cowardice of the worst kind. So, I will not take lectures from anybody on the issue of cowardice.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Tourism: Antrim Coast Road

4. **Mr McMullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the Giro d'Italia television pictures from the coastal villages of Glenarm, Carnlough, Waterfoot and Cushendall, which were beamed worldwide, have shown the massive tourism potential of the Antrim coast road. (AQT 1124/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: It was a fantastic spectacle. The sight of the horses riding along the beach in parallel with the cyclists on the road was fantastic. That is the kind of image that we want for Northern Ireland. I have no doubt that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland will want to use many of the scenes from the Giro d'Italia, particularly the helicopter shots, which showed our countryside in its splendour.

I have been to the north coast on many occasions, and I have cycled up some of its elements, although not the Torr Head. It is an excellent part of Northern Ireland and is a real attractor for those who want to come to Northern Ireland as visitors.

Mr McMullan: I thank the First Minister for those encouraging words. Will he give me an assurance that we will revisit the plan for tourism for the Antrim coast road? We need to take it to its tourist potential, have the relevant finances to do that and put the Antrim coast road up there with the other successes that we have had, such as that with the Titanic Quarter. That is something that has been called for by the tourist providers in the area for years. I am one of them, with 25 years' experience in the tourist trade, and we have never had publicity like this before.

Mr Speaker: I indicate to the Member to finish.

Mr McMullan: We must act on that to make the most of the legacy.

Mr P Robinson: There has been significant investment along the north Antrim coast when we come to the Giant's Causeway. That facility is attracting a very significant number of people. The last figures that I saw indicated that about 70% of those who go to the Giant's Causeway are visitors from outside Northern Ireland.

The Member draws attention to a very significant asset that we have for the tourist industry. While he has made his remarks by way of a question to me, I am sure they have been heard by the Minister in charge of tourism, Arlene Foster, who is in her place. I have no doubt that she will want to use the best of the assets that we have in Northern Ireland to attract people to this Province.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Welfare Reform Bill: Sinn Féin Block

6. **Mr G Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to avoid the loss of millions of pounds as a result of Sinn Féin's blocking the progression of the Welfare Reform Bill. (AQT 1126/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: To get a consensus in our Executive, a majority from both sections of our community is required. At the last Executive meeting, the details of which have been published, I asked for independent experts to be brought in to give us a set of figures on the implications, so that we would not be arguing about the figures. I have also asked for us to take up a whole meeting of the Executive to deal with the issue. So, we are ready to talk, we are ready to discuss, we are ready to move forward with the issue, and I trust that Executive colleagues will be as well.

Regional Development

Mr Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn.

Greystone Road/ Broad Road

1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any funding will be made available for adjustments to the Greystone Road and Broad Road junction in Limavady. (AQO 6143/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department is developing a

scheme proposal for a minor improvement at this junction, which will widen the Greystone Road on its approach to Broad Road and provide additional capacity for vehicles turning left and right out of this junction.

1.45 pm

As a result, there should be a reduction in queues and delays, which, in turn, should ease the frustration experienced by drivers waiting to turn out of the junction. Although there are a number of worthwhile schemes across Northern Ireland competing for inclusion in my Department's minor works programmes, with costs far exceeding the resources available, I am hopeful that this scheme can be progressed at the earliest opportunity.

Mr G Robinson: As this is a main arterial route from Londonderry to Coleraine and there is a lot of traffic in the area, does the Minister not agree that urgent action needs to be taken on that very dangerous junction? I encourage the Minister to do all in his power to rectify that.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary. A full assessment has taken place, and preliminary design estimates a cost of almost £46,000 to carry out the work. We are aware of the issue, and I am hopeful that we can progress the scheme in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer and for his continuing support for the north-west. He is, of course, aware that he inherited a long list of goodies promised by his predecessor, including a bypass at Ballykelly. Dare I ask the Minister where in the order of events that now rests?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question and thank him for his kind comments on my commitment to roads all over Northern Ireland and not just the north-west.

For the Ballykelly bypass, the investment delivery plan for roads includes the dualling of seven kilometres of the A26 Frosses Road between Glarryford crossroads and Drones Road. In January, the Department took ownership of the land required to build the scheme, enabling work to remove hedges to be completed. Temporary fencing has been erected on the boundary. I note his comments, particularly on Ballykelly, and will provide him with a fuller answer in writing.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Buíochas leis an Aire as na

freagraí sin. I thank the Minister for his answers. In his reply to George Robinson, he referred to what could, perhaps, be described as smaller schemes than some of the major schemes, and their importance locally. With that in mind, I welcome this morning's announcement about the Buncrana Road because some minor schemes are of great importance.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. Of course, minor schemes are particularly important at the start of election week. *[Laughter.]* The press offices are hot, I think, catching other people's apples and variously reacting to positive news that I have been able to bring on many road improvements across the country, be it resurfacing or a structural demand. I am content enough for others to share in my reflected glory.

Nevertheless, it is important that money is retained and targeted at a range of minor schemes that can improve the lives of a great many people, particularly in rural parts. It is important that I as Minister am allowed to focus on schemes of that nature and have the necessary finance made available to me to achieve them.

A2 Shore Road Greenisland Scheme

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A2 Shore Road Greenisland Scheme. (AQO 6144/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I advise the Member that work is well under way on the A2 Shore Road scheme at Greenisland. The contractor is approximately midway through a very tight 120-week programme that involves upgrading to dual carriageway standard some 3.5 kilometres of the A2 between the Jordanstown Road and Seapark. Improvements will include four new roundabouts at Shore Avenue; Shorelands; Station Road, Greenisland; and Seapark.

Work began in March 2013 and is programmed for completion in summer 2015. To date, approximately 300,000 man-hours have been worked on the project. That is equivalent to 180 people working full time on the project for a year. Construction of a new carriageway for Carrickfergus-bound traffic is ongoing while traffic uses the existing road adjacent to it. It will later be reconstructed to become the Belfast-bound carriageway. Between Jordanstown Road and Station Road, accommodation works for adjacent properties, retaining walls, utility diversions, culvert construction and construction of the

carriageway are all ongoing. Between Shore Avenue and Shorelands, kerbs are in place and road construction up to base course level has been completed.

Along the offline section between Station Road and Seapark, the beams for Whinfield Lane Bridge are in place. Between Station Road and Whinfield Lane, kerbs are in place, and road construction is complete up to base course level. Between Whinfield Lane and Seapark, the earthworks are at an advanced stage, and work is ongoing on the kerbing and laying of the stone sub-base.

Throughout the trafficked section of the works site, one lane of traffic is being maintained in each direction, matching the traffic conditions prior to the scheme commencing.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am pleased that, like the A8, the A2 scheme at Greenisland is progressing well. However, with the renewed interest in cycling following the Giro d'Italia, will the Minister outline the extent of the cycle network that is associated with the A2 at Greenisland and acknowledge that there is considerable opportunity to extend the cycle network to Carrickfergus and to link the whole area to the Belfast cycling network?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am particularly gratified, as Minister, to have brought the A2 scheme not only to its starting blocks but to its outworking. I am conscious that it is a long-awaited scheme in the region. Promises had been made in previous years. I take some pride that the Ulster Unionist Party is delivering the A2 scheme and am very pleased about that.

My Department has incorporated cycling facilities into the scheme and has plans to extend the network further in the Carrickfergus direction. The scheme comprises the widening of the existing road between Loughshore Park and Station Road in Greenisland. That section has been designed as an urban dual carriageway and will incorporate a 3.5-metre-wide combined footway and cycleway along the shore side of the road as far as Station Road. Between Station Road and Seapark, a new offline rural dual carriageway is being constructed, and pedestrians and cyclists will continue to use the existing but quiet bypassed section of the Shore Road.

We have proposals, and we are prepared to work with others. This is election week, and new councils will be elected to take office. My Department looks forward to working with local

government as we seek to promote and enhance cycling facilities.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his progress update. I congratulate him on the work thus far. I ask a very specific question about properties 2, 4 and 6 Station Road, Greenisland, which, as a result of the layout of the road, appear to be in a very hazardous traffic situation when the road, as currently designed, is completed. Does he agree that the potential for further blighted properties in that area needs to be looked at urgently?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will accept, in fairness, that that is a matter that I need to refer to, and I will correspond with him directly.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the Minister's update on a very successfully managed scheme, although some local politicians have been dining out on it for some time now. This is a £60 million project. Is he aware of how successful any of the social clauses of the contract were?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. We expect and insist that social clauses be part of all contracts now and that there be opportunities, particularly for young people, to avail themselves of skills. I paid a relatively recent visit on-site to meet some of the apprentices involved there, and I was encouraged — because employment and learning was a former responsibility of mine — to see that scheme working effectively. I was able to report that the contractors were very pleased with the progress, standard and quality of the people engaged in the programme. I welcome that, and I will continue to ensure that it remains part of the contracts that we award.

Speed Limits: 20 mph Zones

3. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the five pilot sites at which his Department is proposing to introduce 20 mph zones. (AQO 6145/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The protection of vulnerable road users such as children, the elderly and cyclists is a top priority for my Department. Over previous years, traffic-calming measures have been the most successful intervention in reducing road-user casualties in residential areas. Features used include road humps, central islands and gateway signage, all of which reduce vehicle speeds to about 20 mph.

In parts of Great Britain, signed-only 20 mph speed limits have been introduced in residential and other areas where there are high numbers of pedestrians and cyclists. Although up to now there has been limited research into how effective they are at reducing vehicle speeds and increasing cycling and walking activity, I believe that it is worth trialling the concept at five locations in Northern Ireland: Belfast city centre, Langley Road in Ballynahinch, the Rosses in Ballymena, Whitehall in Ballycastle and Merville Garden Village in Whiteabbey.

Average vehicle speed surveys and public consultation at the five trial sites have been completed, the necessary traffic regulation orders are being processed, and I anticipate the trial reduced speed limits should be in place by the end of the year.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. How many 20 mph zones do we have and how many miles of our roads are covered by those zones?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will know that there is a considerable number of de facto 20 mph schemes; I do not have the exact number. It is interesting to reflect on the feedback on the success of those zones and on how the travelling public views them as well as the important issue of enforcement. We have been in consultation with the PSNI on this issue, and it is fair to say that enforcement is a major resource factor for the police, who have a concern about it. However, the fact that limits exist in built-up areas will have a positive effect on calming down the speed of traffic in those areas.

Mr Spratt: I note the Minister's comments on enforcement. Two weeks ago, in evidence to the Committee for Regional Development, PSNI witnesses expressed concerns about enforcement and resources. They indicated that they, along with the Minister's departmental officials, should look holistically at other measures such as calming. Would that not be a better approach? Since enforcement will be required, what discussions have recently taken place with the PSNI on the subject?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I have indicated that we have had discussions with the PSNI on this very issue and heard at first-hand some of the concerns that it has expressed. That, in part, is one reason why we have proceeded cautiously to identify the five pilot areas in order to carry out a full and proper study on the

patterns that will emerge. It will be necessary to take time to assess all the issues, including that of enforcement. I look forward to updating the House with reports on how those schemes are progressing. However, I caution Members that it will take a considerable period before we move to whole-scale implementation because of some of the issues that have been raised, even through the question.

2.00 pm

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I note that the Minister said that there is limited research on what has taken place in the UK. Can he identify the local buy-in that there has been by residents in areas where it has been implemented in the UK? Have there been discussions with residents to see whether there is local buy-in in the five pilot areas that have been proposed in Northern Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: I agree entirely with the Member's point. I would much prefer to see a good level of local cooperation developed before simply imposing solutions on communities. That will be an important aspect even in the trials that we are prepared to initiate. As with all these things, unless there is local buy-in, the prospect of success is reduced. I encourage local community buy-in from public representatives and, indeed, community groups and the local population where those schemes are initially tried out or if there is a request to move forward on a broader basis.

Procurement: NI Contracts

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development what percentage of procurement contracts signed by his Department are awarded to companies based in Northern Ireland. (AQO 6146/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Before I respond to the Member's question, I would like to remind the House that procurement legislation requires above-threshold procurements to be advertised in the European journal. In addition, public sector procurements are subject to open competition in order to secure best value for money in accordance with the guidance in 'Managing Public Money Northern Ireland'.

In response to the question, I can advise that my Department procures the vast majority of its contracts through two centres of procurement expertise, namely the Central Procurement Directorate in DFP for supplies and services, and the Department's own centre of

procurement expertise for construction-related contracts. During 2013-14, the Department awarded 68 contracts that were procured through those centres of procurement expertise. Of those contracts, 43 were awarded to companies that are based in Northern Ireland. That represents 63% of the contracts awarded. The approximate value of those contracts was almost £300 million, of which £243 million was awarded to companies that are based in Northern Ireland. That represents 81% of the value of contracts awarded. I can also confirm that the remaining contracts were awarded to a mix of companies from Great Britain and multinational companies that have offices in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response. We acknowledge the details that he provided in his answer to my initial question but what steps has he taken to ensure that all procurement contracts maximise the potential for social clauses throughout Northern Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, in reference to the earlier point, my Department and I are determined to ensure that social contracts and the social element of contracts that are awarded can give young and unemployed people in particular the opportunity to improve their skills and get into the job market. The same applies, wherever possible, with these contracts, which are, of course, subject to EU legislation.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that Northern Ireland has a tremendous reputation for having a lot of major construction companies, civil engineering companies and public works contractors that have done excellent work throughout these islands? Some of them, including members of the Construction Employers Federation, are expressing frustration at how the Central Procurement Directorate is operating. Does he agree that social clauses could help in that regard?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Indeed, I join him in adding my tribute, particularly to the construction industry in Northern Ireland, which, under the most difficult of economic circumstances, continues to provide employment prospects in all parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, in parts of Europe. Although I am pleased that Northern Ireland firms are winning contracts in other places, I would much prefer, like him, that we could award more contracts in Northern Ireland for the construction industry, either for road construction or other aspects. That matter is

raised continually when I meet members from the industry, who acknowledge the amount of work they do in Scotland, England, Wales and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland but would love the opportunity to do more work at home. I hope that the economic conditions and moneys that can be awarded to my Department from the Executive will assist with that because that, in turn, is the secret to making real strides in the local economy to improve things.

Mr Swann: I congratulate the Minister on the high percentage of contracts that his Department awards to Northern Ireland companies. Will he advise what percentage of procurement contracts his Department's arm's-length bodies award to Northern Ireland or GB companies?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, indeed, for his comments. My Department's arm's-length bodies, Northern Ireland Water and the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo), are also centres of procurement expertise. During 2013-14, they awarded 372 contracts, 258 of which were to companies based in Northern Ireland. That represents 69% of the contracts awarded. The approximate value of those contracts was nearly £260 million, almost £160 million of which was to companies based in Northern Ireland. That represents 62% of the value of contracts awarded. Although above-threshold contracts are advertised through the European journal in accordance with procurement legislation, I am happy to confirm that the majority of the remaining contracts were awarded to a mix of companies from Great Britain and to multinational companies with offices in Northern Ireland.

Arc 21: Road Infrastructure

5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with the Minister of the Environment regarding the suitability of the road infrastructure in Mallusk to serve the proposed Arc 21 waste facility. (AQO 6147/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Discussions have taken place and are ongoing between officials in my Department and DOE planning as part of the normal planning process. As the Speaker and the House will know, it would be unusual for Ministers to be directly involved at this stage in a planning application. My Department is a statutory consultee in the planning process and will respond to DOE planning as required throughout the time span of the application.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the road infrastructure in the Mallusk area already carries a large number of heavy vehicles and is wholly unsuitable for any additional heavy traffic that the proposed facility would bring?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. I do not want to second-guess the necessary discussions or consultations that will take place, by law, to determine this application. I am aware of the network of roads in the area and the limitations. I am also aware of the potential controversies around this application. We will await due process.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his reply to Ms Cameron's question. I know that the Minister is constrained in what he can say, but is he aware of the widespread opposition that exists to the Arc21 facility, particularly in relation to the overburdening of the road infrastructure in that area by large lorries delivering large tonnage of waste?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. The Member will know that ultimate responsibility for the decision will rest with his colleague Mark H Durkan, the Minister of the Environment, and it is not my job to tell Mark Durkan what to do or how to do it.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that he is trying to be very circumspect in this, but he knows that it is a very sensitive project. Will he take that into consideration if he is asked to look at the road structures around this facility, which has massive local disagreement?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. You can try all you like, but it has not reached my table yet.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister and his Department ensure that they meet the community groups in Mallusk, Mayfield and all the surrounding areas? That is where the concern is, and, as we have already heard, it is extremely strong at the moment.

Mr Kennedy: Again, I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. If it is considered appropriate and at the right time, I will be happy to give positive consideration to that request.

Park and Ride: Dungiven

6. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has identified any sites other than Magheraboy for a park and ride site on the A6 at Dungiven. (AQO 6148/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I understand that the Member recently met officials from my Department to discuss a number of alternative sites that he had proposed for the provision of park-and-ride facilities on the A6 at Dungiven. Following discussions between my officials, Translink and the PSNI, the site at Magheraboy remains the option favoured and has the greatest likelihood of being delivered in the short term.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that when, not if, the Dungiven bypass proceeds, a much bigger area might be required to the west of the town rather than the Magheraboy site to the east?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I accept the point that he makes. Identifying an appropriate site is not without its challenges. We will continue to work to see whether any appropriate sites can be identified in the event of the scheme being carried forward.

Mr Campbell: I take on board the Minister's comment about the work ongoing to try to get a suitable site. In Dungiven, there are a number of terror-related murals, signs and posters. Will he ensure that whatever site is identified is free from that sort of activity in order that people from right around the Dungiven area will be able to use it?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am not a fan or a supporter in any way of such murals or memorials, and I know that the Member, as a former Minister for Regional Development, encountered the same issues as to how to deal with those effectively and properly and yet not start an epidemic of new murals and such things. I very much hope that, as we move forward, people will be sensible about those issues. With proper community consultation, many of the items that offend so many of the law-abiding society from both sections of the community can be eased out and removed from the landscape.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions for oral answer to the Minister for Regional

Development. We will now move on to topical questions. Thomas Buchanan is not in his place for question 1.

Traffic Volume: Clady

2. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will look at ways to address the ever-increasing volume of traffic going through the village of Clady outside Strabane, given that residents have contacted me and the local DRD office down through the years about the large numbers of articulated lorries that travel through the village. (AQT 1132/11-15)

2.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her question. I know that it is an issue on which she is providing questions for written answer.

We give an undertaking that we will look at the assessment of current traffic movements to see whether any improvements are possible. I think that our capacity to do anything is limited, but I am happy to give the matter further consideration.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his response and extend to him an invitation to come to Clady to see for himself how narrow the street is for the capacity that is going down it. Can he look at ways of introducing a weight restriction along that street? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question and, indeed, her invitation to go to look at a narrow street in Clady. Of course, one would have to weigh up the potential negative impacts of weight restrictions on the local business community and on the haulage companies that use the road. All of these things are a balance. I am happy to look in more detail at whether an on-site visit will be involved. We can consider that, too, but, in the meantime, we will look at any measures or anything else that we can offer to reduce some of the impacts that are clearly evident.

Cycling Infrastructure

3. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has a long-term strategy for the development of cycle lanes and cycle routes across Northern Ireland, given that, over the past couple of weekends, we have seen great racing on two wheels, from the North West 200 and the Giro d'Italia, and, in an

earlier response to Roy Beggs, he commented on the potential for cycle lanes on the A2. (AQT 1133/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. The prestige associated with the cycling and motorbike racing over the past two weeks has put Northern Ireland on the international stage. Obviously, I attended both events. The Giro d'Italia was very, very successful, and I was very pleased. I am hopeful that we can continue to build the legacy of the cycling revolution that I so want and desire by improving our overall infrastructure. Yes, it will cost money and, yes, it will take time, but I think that the momentum is with us. I very much hope that as the cycling unit, which I have established in the Department, brings forward its strategy for cycling, not only in Belfast but all over Northern Ireland, we will look at ways in which we can improve the infrastructure and make it as safe as possible.

On the subject of safety, I also had the opportunity and privilege to attend the North West 200 on Thursday night and Saturday. It was a very spectacular road-racing event. Unfortunately, the sport brings attendant dangers. On behalf of the House, I extend my concern and good wishes to the families of Simon Andrews and Franck Petricola, recovering as they are in the Royal Victoria Hospital. I wish them and their family and friends well. I also pay tribute to the organisers and competitors of what was a truly memorable North West 200.

Mr Ross: I think that the House will, of course, echo the Minister's comments. Cycling has been a growing sport in recent years. Clearly, from the success of the Giro, many more people will be interested in getting a bicycle and using it to cycle to work or to school, or, indeed, for sporting purposes.

One of the criticisms from cycling clubs and cyclists in Northern Ireland is that many of the cycle lanes that are in place have not been maintained well or are, in some instances, more dangerous for them. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the cycling unit in his Department will work closely with cycling clubs throughout Northern Ireland to ensure that we develop not only well maintained cycling lanes and routes but lanes and routes that will improve safety for those who are out on the roads during the week?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I think that this is where the secret will lie as we go forward: how we can

improve the existing infrastructure and have new infrastructure to make cycling an even more viable alternative mode of transport for people to enjoy. I am very happy to work with cycling clubs, organisations such as Sustrans and others from the cycling fraternity. I am very positive that we can move forward.

My recent visit to Copenhagen proved that there are substantial benefits to be accrued for those cycling. Those benefits are not only environmental and economic but will be found in quality of lifestyle and an improvement in health. By working together, Northern Ireland can reach out for and be part of those significant benefits so that we can look forward to making cycling a mode of transport that is not simply for middle-aged men in Lycra but something that the entire community enjoys.

Bankrupt Developers

4. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there is any help or assistance that his Department could bring forward to alleviate some of the problems created when developers are declared bankrupt, leaving developments with unfinished roads and no mechanism to finish the infrastructure. (AQT 1134/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I can inform him that we have had meetings with those in the construction industry and the legal profession, including the Law Society and others, about how we can address the legacy issues that have been caused by economic circumstances that were perhaps beyond everyone's control. It is a substantial challenge, because there are not unlimited amounts of money to be provided. Indeed, in any new development, the bonding system is in place to ensure that such services can be funded by the developer on behalf of the householders he is building the houses for.

I am aware of the issues. The Committee for Regional Development recently published its report into them. We are continuing to study that report. We hope to bring forward and to implement some of the — *[Interruption.]* There should be no prompting from the Back Benches. *[Laughter.]* I did not think that prompting is allowed, even in a stage whisper. We will continue to look at the implementation of the recommendations that are in the report.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I appreciate that there is an opportunity for some of the developments to be finished. I am thinking particularly of one in

Ballyclare, where the developer was to develop a major road. The town is at crisis point with congestion. Unless the Department does something, nothing is going to happen and the town is going to remain in gridlock for another generation before anything is done. A bypass road was proposed. Members asked questions about other areas —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to finish.

Mr Girvan: Is there a possibility that the Department will divvy up and do something for the provision of a bypass road for Ballyclare?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. I am not sure whether you were prompted to recall that as part of the supplementary, but I will accept it in the spirit in which it is offered. I am aware of the Ballyclare situation. Indeed, I have had meetings with my party colleague Danny Kinahan on the issue. It is a challenging issue. A link road was to be provided as a positive consequence of a new development, which, clearly, has encountered severe difficulties. There is also an issue as to whether the scheme that is necessary to assist with traffic movement in the area is of sufficiently high priority in my Department, but we will continue to look at it in order to see whether we can explore a more positive outcome.

Unadopted Roads: Augher

5. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any potential funding to assist residents of Augher, County Tyrone, where there are a number of roads that need to be upgraded to an adoptable standard, albeit that she has engaged with Roads Service on the matter, with the result that it will not provide any funding. (AQT 1135/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her question. That is really the nub of the issue; the legacy of bonds that are not or cannot be enforced for any particular reason. That can leave some housing developments unfinished, which, in turn, leads to frustration for those who have purchased houses in good faith. However, for central government, through my Department, to fund all those improvements is not possible, unless a vast sum of money — in the region of hundreds of millions of pounds Province-wide — were to be made available to carry out that work. Having listened to the Finance Minister recently, I do not have the sense that he has that funding available to give to me at this point.

Ms McGahan: I thank the Minister for his response. For clarification, it is a rural road that I am speaking about, so I apologise for that. Minister, can you outline what powers the new councils will have to deal with the issue of unadoptable roads?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. At the moment, my understanding is that we are not transferring responsibility for minor roads to local government. I know that that had been a suggestion in the early days — in the previous century — when local government reform was being considered, but that is not on the agenda at present. I still have full responsibility for maintaining and upgrading the entire road network.

North West 200: Safety Lessons

6. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he can guarantee that any lessons around safety issues that have been learnt at the North West 200 will be transferred to the Ulster Grand Prix and its organisers, given the two accidents on the North West 200 course at the weekend and the fact that the premier motorbike race, the Ulster Grand Prix, which just happens to take place in my constituency, is coming up. (AQT 1136/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. He will know and confirm that safety is paramount for the organisers of all road races. They do not need me to give advice or to persuade them of that. Certainly, in all of the road racing events that I sanction and sign the orders for, I know that, for all of the organisers, be that of the Tandragee 100, Dundrod, the North West 200 or other meetings, safety is the main priority and that is how it should be.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his answer. In previous years, his Department has been very good in working with the organisers and has greatly improved the road safety of that course. Can the Minister assure us that, if any other road safety issues are highlighted, funds may become available to implement any necessary amendments prior to the racing occurring this year?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. We work closely and liaise with the organising bodies of all of the races, and I think that we have had a very good record of improving surfaces and enhancing safety. That will continue to be the case.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Regional Development Minister. I ask the House to take its ease as we change the top Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Justice

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that questions 6 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Forensic Science Northern Ireland: Vacancies

1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the current number of vacancies for senior personnel within Forensic Science Northern Ireland. (AQO 6157/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): At 9 May 2014, there were 14 senior personnel positions in Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI). None of these posts is currently vacant.

Mr Hilditch: I appreciate that. The question related to a media article from a few weeks ago about the difficulty filling a particular vacancy. Is the Minister content with the organisation's structures, considering the criticism of processing times?

Mr Ford: The issue of processing times is rather different from the matter of staffing. If the House wants the full detail on staffing, I believe that, of 200 posts in FSNI, there is one vacancy at administrative assistant level. So there clearly is not the significant staffing issue that was originally highlighted.

A number of different initiatives are under way to improve the delivery of Forensic Science services and, in particular, to speed things up. They include the greater use of live links, the introduction of a rapid analysis scheme for cannabis and a new streamlined process for other drugs. Significant work is being undertaken on the issue of speeding up.

Mrs McKeivitt: Will the Minister assure the House that Forensic Science will receive all the resources necessary to run an efficient and effective service?

Mr Ford: I thank Mrs McKeivitt for the question. The reality is that, as in, for example, medical science, forensic science is enhancing its capabilities quite significantly. At a time of difficult budgetary pressures, it is always difficult to say that we are capable of doing everything that we wish to do. However, under the transformation programme that is under way, significant efforts are being made to streamline processes, speed things up and reduce costs.

FSNI was the first in the United Kingdom to use DNA 17 technology. That is a clear example of good investment producing good results across the system. I certainly believe that, if we look at the construction of the new lab and the introduction of an improved IT system, we will see good value for money. However, as ever, we could always do with more resources for some of those services.

Peace Walls

2. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the implementation of the Programme for Government 2011-15 commitment 68 on seeking local agreement to reduce the number of peace walls. (AQO 6158/11-15)

Mr Ford: To date, the overall number of interface structures for which the Department of Justice has responsibility has been reduced from 59 to 53 in pursuance of our Programme for Government commitment. A further significant sign of progress is the level of engagement taking place on the future of other interface structures. Through DOJ-led initiatives, and in conjunction with eight projects funded through the International Fund for Ireland peace walls programme, there is engagement at some 40 of the remaining structures. There is also significant work ongoing on additional structures owned by the Housing Executive.

Whilst there are examples of positive and progressive work, I acknowledge that, in some locations, people do not believe that the conditions are yet right for the removal of structures. The important thing is that there is engagement to explore what is possible to bring about the conditions whereby they can support that change. My Department will encourage and seek to facilitate, but it will not rush communities that are not ready.

Community engagement and consultation remain at the heart of this process. What we all need to do now is to build on the progress

already made and on the engagement and to deliver a meaningful programme of change that can bring physical, community, economic and social renewal to interface areas.

On the commitment in the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy to remove the structures by 2023, I believe that it is essential that we have a dedicated programme budget in place, alongside a cross-Executive commitment to address economic and social renewal as part of a holistic plan for interface areas. I also want there to be an intensive programme of good relations work in hard-to-reach areas.

I know from DOJ's engagement with interface communities that they would like more certainty about the strategy. I am keen to secure that and to maintain the current momentum.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the commitment of communities to change, even on an incremental basis, is hugely encouraging? What more does he believe that the Executive can do to support and encourage communities to make further progress?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for that question. The fact that we have engagement on 40 of the 53 remaining interface structures, and have seen six removed since the creation of the Department of Justice, is a sign of good work. It annoys me when media references are made to the fact that there are now more interface structures than there were at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, when the trajectory in the past four years has been for removal rather than new structures being added.

It is absolutely clear that we need a detailed programme of neighbourhood renewal on interface areas to provide people with improvements that are beyond the remit of my Department. DOJ can fund structures and the removal of structures, but, when improvement is needed to the local environment, whether through roads or other measures, other Departments, particularly DSD and DRD, have responsibilities. A single funding stream is needed to ensure that we have a holistic programme that addresses the needs of those who live in interface areas in a way that builds confidence and enables people gradually to see structures opened up and eventually removed.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fheagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he

agree that the marching season has a negative impact on attempts to achieve local consensus to reduce the number of peace walls?

Mr Ford: Ms McCorley has a point. Clearly, there are times of the year when it is easier to make progress than at other times. In the 40 areas in which we have ongoing engagement, engagement continues through the marching season. How much of that is open and how much of it is done in relatively quiet meetings between people from different sides of an interface is a matter that has to be addressed. However, particularly in the work aided by the Community Relations Council, Belfast City Council and the IFI, we are seeing an ongoing programme of detailed engagement, which is producing results right through the year.

Mr Nesbitt: I am sure that the Minister is aware that those who live closest to the structures are concerned that their voices may be effectively drowned out in the consultation by those who live at some remove from the structures. What steps has he taken to ensure that appropriate weight is given to the opinions of those who live in the shadow of the structures?

Mr Ford: I do not think that it is the case that voices are drowned out. When my officials engage with communities, and when others, such as CRC and the IFI-led groups, carry out work, they look at the entire needs of an area and, in particular, at the kinds of issues that I addressed when I responded to Mrs Cochrane. It is not a matter of simply weighing up numbers. It is a matter of looking at the needs of an entire area. That is the kind of work that is being done in those areas where we have seen the removal of structures. That is the work that continues in the other 40 areas at this time.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Does he accept that, when concentrating on peace walls, paramilitary-related murals have to be considered? What can he say, as we go forward, about the attitude that will be taken towards those to ensure that the glorification of paramilitary violence creates less of a chill factor?

Mr Ford: Mr Byrne will not be the least bit surprised to know that I agree with his concerns about the chill factor of certain murals. I am on record as saying that, if Italian cyclists had viewed election posters, that would have been less offensive than some of the murals they cycled past two weeks ago. Murals go way beyond the remit of my Department. It illustrates the need for real, serious

engagement to make some sense of the Together: Building a United Community strategy, to build on the good work of a number of agencies and to see a range of public bodies that have responsibilities in this area, including the Housing Executive and Roads Service, carry out their responsibilities in full.

Gerry Adams: Arrest

3. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Justice what contact there was between the PSNI and his ministerial private office prior to the arrest of Mr Gerry Adams. (AQO 6159/11-15)

Mr Ford: There was no contact between my private office and the Police Service before the arrest of Gerry Adams. I do not expect to be notified in advance of operational decisions about specific individuals.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister agree with me that the fact that the PSNI contacted the British Secretary of State and ignored his office does nothing to inspire confidence in policing and justice? Indeed, does it not smack of old habits from an old era?

Mr Ford: I think that Ms Boyle does not quite understand the role of the Secretary of State in this area, which is entirely different from my role where issues relate to matters of national security. I suggest that, if she wishes to question the behaviour of the Secretary of State, she should contact the Secretary of State. I am satisfied that the police officers behaved entirely properly in this case.

Mr Givan: Minister, I am sure that you agree that not only should the police be free to carry out their operational duties without fear from any political repercussions but that the Police Ombudsman's Office, which is investigating two cases relating to Gerry Adams, and the Public Prosecution Service, which asked the Attorney General to carry out an independent review of why it did not prosecute Mr Adams based on what knowledge he had to do with his niece, should be free to publish their reports. The PPS has been waiting six months. It should be free to publish that report so that the public can see whether or not it has carried out its job.

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Givan that all the agencies of the justice system should be free to carry out their jobs properly and impartially, as I believe they all seek to do. I also believe that that means that it is the responsibility of each of us, and not only in one

part of the House, to ensure that pressure is not placed on those agencies.

Mr Elliott: Has the Minister had any discussions with the leaders of Sinn Féin in relation to some of their members' comments about their support or lack of support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I have had no specific discussions on that topic. I believe that it should be possible for Members to show the political maturity that understands their role without being lectured by a Minister.

Mr McKinney: Does the Minister agree that Sinn Féin allegations of political policing, accompanied by remarks of, "How dare they touch our leader", were wrong and irresponsible?

Mr Ford: I can only agree with Mr McKinney. It is obvious from my comments that I reject any attempt from any quarter to interfere in the justice system or any of the relevant agencies. Clearly, some of the comments by members of Sinn Féin at that time were entirely inappropriate, as indeed have been comments made by members of other parties in other circumstances; for example, on public order matters.

Hate Crime/Racist Attacks: Belfast

4. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Justice what action his Department is taking to combat the increasing number of hate crime incidents. (AQO 6160/11-15)

14. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any meetings he has had with the PSNI in relation to the recent racially motivated attacks in Belfast. (AQO 6170/11-15)

Mr Ford: With the your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 14 together.

I have given a commitment through the community safety strategy that the justice system will tackle hate crime and the harm that it causes. My Department chairs a multiagency group that was set up to deliver the strategy and a range of actions being taken to combat hate crime. Legislation is in place that allows for an increase in sentence for offences aggravated by hostility because of race, religion, sexual orientation or disability.

My Department is working with the PSNI to promote the work of hate crime advocates, who are a consistent point of contact for victims for practical and emotional advice and assistance. Policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) also play an important role in making communities safer. Action plans for 2014-15 will identify where interventions are required in tackling hate crimes. A practical measure to support victims is the hate incident practical action scheme aimed at providing personal protection and safety measures at home. In partnership with the Housing Executive and the PSNI, my Department is examining ways of promoting and raising awareness of the scheme.

I have discussed the recent increase in racist attacks with the Chief Constable and met the Secretary of State and senior police officers last week regarding action being taken. As you are aware, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I attended a recent Black and Minority Ethnic Parliament and responded to questions on work being taken forward to tackle these attacks and confirmed that such views are not shared or supported by the majority of our people. My officials attended a recent meeting in Belfast City Hall regarding these racist attacks and will participate in any further groups or actions arising from that meeting.

2.45 pm

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I add my and my party's condemnation of all racist and hate crimes. Is the Minister satisfied with the contribution of the PCSPs in tackling hate crime?

Mr Ford: Clearly, a range of actions are being taken by PCSPs. I know from the most recent quarterly meeting with PCSP managers and my officials that a number of them have very significant issues related to that work in their plans for the coming year. Indeed, in the next day or two, I will write to PCSPs to encourage them to look at that issue, sharing best practice and using some of the examples that are already under way in some areas to promote action against hate in all respects. Clearly, it is an issue that must be addressed as we seek to look more widely at the community safety strategy for all of us.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister share the view of Assistant Chief Constable Will Kerr that many of these hate crimes, particularly in parts of Belfast, are orchestrated by the UVF and are effectively a form of ethnic cleansing?

Mr Ford: The issue that Mr McAleer has raised has been addressed in discussions that I have had with ACC Kerr and his colleagues. There is no doubt that some of the hate crime incidents we have seen, particularly those of a racist nature in east Belfast, have had links to the UVF, but we should certainly not suggest that everything connected with hate crime is the responsibility of the east Belfast UVF. Sadly, we have seen hate crime incidents in almost every part of Northern Ireland and in a number of different areas. There is no doubt that the police need to ensure that they continue the good work that is already under way, in particular to tackle the hate crime that comes from specific organisations.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answers. Does the Minister agree that hate crime is highly damaging to our international reputation? Does he further agree that it is perhaps time to look at the legislation to ensure that the people who are guilty of these horrendous crimes are put where they belong: behind bars?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Dallat that hate crime is one of those issues that can be a potential chill factor for people visiting Northern Ireland or people coming to work in Northern Ireland or even, I suspect, for people seeking to invest in Northern Ireland. I am not sure that, at this point, there is a significant need for a review of the legislation, as he suggests. The reality is that we have opportunities for enhanced sentencing where issues are related to hate crime. Significantly, under the 2004 Criminal Justice Order's references to crimes that are aggravated by hostility, judges can take into account a hate motivation when they award sentences. Clearly, there is not always an easy case to be made that a particular crime may have been aggravated by hostility. It is a matter of looking at the practice of the various agencies to ensure that we get that particular motivation taken into account to ensure adequate and appropriate sentencing where possible.

Mr Dickson: Minister, in dealing with hate crime, do you agree that, sadly, it is necessary for you and your Executive colleagues to reinvigorate the Unite Against Hate campaign to remove the scourge of those who commit these crimes in Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: The original Unite Against Hate campaign, which was launched five years ago, was successful in responding to what were seen at the time as a number of high-profile racist incidents. The key partners at that time were OFMDFM and the DOJ. Originally, it

started with our predecessors in the NIO as well the police, the Equality Commission and the Community Relations Council. To some extent, that campaign has lost impetus in recent times, and there may well be a case for saying that it should be revamped in the near future.

Recently, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ask that they consider that, to seek an update on the position — it is an OFMDFM-led campaign — and to offer my commitment that the Department of Justice will do all that it can if we seek to revise the Unite Against Hate campaign. In particular, that would include looking at the implications right across Northern Ireland and not merely some of the good work that has been done by Belfast City Council and the police in recent days.

Policing: Twaddell Avenue Costs

5. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost to date of policing the protest at Twaddell Avenue. (AQO 6161/11-15)

Mr Ford: The cost of policing the Twaddell protest now exceeds £9 million. On 30 April 2014, the exact cost was £8.8 million, including opportunity costs of £2.9 million.

Ms McGahan: I thank the Minister for his response. Minister, what conversations have you had with the Chief Constable in relation to the gaps in policing that have occurred as a result of that money being squandered?

Mr Ford: Although Ms McGahan raises an interesting point, I cannot say that I have discussed specific gaps that have opened up because of the money that has been spent on policing Twaddell. However, I have discussed the overall issue. For example, it is clear that there were significantly fewer arrests over the past year around what one might call normal crime because of public order issues and because of resources being diverted to Twaddell. Therefore, the community across Northern Ireland was put at greater risk because the police were less active, and that, effectively, is the opportunity cost of £2.9 million. It certainly causes me significant concern that an issue that should not continue to cost has cost such a huge amount of money at a time of decreasing resources. We have significant pressures on the police and on other parts of the justice system; therefore, it is time that the Twaddell camp went away, people accepted the determination of the Parades Commission, ceased putting pressure on the Police Service and allowed it to do the job that it should be doing for every part of Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his forthright answer on the Twaddell protest. That enormous amount of money — £9 million — could have been spent rejuvenating the Ardoyne and Woodvale communities who live in that area. Does the Minister agree that such a monumental waste of money could easily be set aside if people were to sit down on a neighbourly basis and talk neighbour to neighbour to settle that contentious parading dispute?

Mr Ford: I entirely endorse the points that Mr Maginness has made. It is clear from some parts of Northern Ireland, most particularly when we look at the engagement between the loyal orders and the residents of areas of Derry close to the city walls, that, where that engagement has happened, particularly where it has been facilitated by other groups such as the business organisations in the city of Derry, it has been possible to resolve issues in a way that has reduced tension, reduced the need for policing, even on the days of parades, and certainly not seen such an extended stand-off with such enormous costs, including the cost of policing and the cost of what cannot be done elsewhere and the damage done to community relations in north Belfast.

Victim and Witness Care Unit

7. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the main functions of the recently established victim and witness care unit. (AQO 6163/11-15)

Mr Ford: The victim and witness care unit provides victims and witnesses across Northern Ireland with a single point of contact for their case from when the investigation or charge file is submitted to the Public Prosecution Service through to and including the outcome of any court proceedings. That person will contact the unit through their preferred means — telephone, letter or email — and at a preferred time of day wherever possible. The unit's primary role is to keep victims and witnesses informed of the progress of their case, assess their individual needs and offer access to additional services where appropriate.

The unit provides a range of information, such as if a defendant gets bail and their bail conditions, how to make a victim personal statement and updates at key stages of the process. The unit will advise victims and witnesses if they are required to give evidence. Where someone is giving evidence, the unit will advise on special measures that may be granted to help them give their best evidence

and the facilities available at court to help them prepare for attending court. The unit will also advise victims about the court outcome, including any sentence given.

The new unit is an excellent example of the value of working in partnership, with effective collaborative working between the Public Prosecution Service and the Police Service, supported by staff from Victim Support NI. Victim Support staff can provide immediate advice and emotional support and, if necessary, make referrals for additional help, such as counselling.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Perhaps he could detail whether he has any plans to roll these units out across the North.

Mr Ford: The answer is that there are no plans to roll it out across the North, because rolling out right across Northern Ireland happened a week ago.

Lord Morrow: Can the Minister tell us today how much funding from the offender levy scheme has been directed towards the victim and witness unit to date, and what plans does he have to fund it over the next 12 to 24 months?

Mr Ford: My Department provided approximately £70,000 last year from the victims of crime fund, as Lord Morrow highlighted — the offender levy — to enhance the unit's services. However, fundamentally, the service is provided by the Public Prosecution Service, which is funded by DFP and not my Department, so I had better not stray too far in that direction. The additional funding was £70,000.

Mrs Overend: I wanted to ask the Minister whether the service would be available throughout the whole of Northern Ireland. I presume that it is, considering.

Mr Ford: Yes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You answered your own question. We will move swiftly on.

Filling Stations: HMRC Compliance

8. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice whether he has received a response from HM Treasury in relation to the legislation that prevents the identification of filling stations that

have failed compliance visits by HMRC. (AQO 6164/11-15)

Mr Ford: At a previous Question Time, Members asked about the possibility of naming and shaming filling stations that HM Revenue and Customs had found to be selling illicit diesel. HMRC advice at the time was that section 18 of the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005 has a taxpayer confidentiality clause that makes it an offence to divulge details of anyone in relation to such an investigation and that it could not identify those believed to be evading tax in respect of fuel cases or give information that might lead to their identification.

I advised Members that I had written to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, asking that the Treasury consider a review of the legislation. I have since received a response. I am pleased to note that the Treasury has assured me of the seriousness with which it views fuel fraud, the loss of revenue, the undercutting of honest businesses and the environmental impact. In addition — I welcome this — it has advised that HMRC is reconsidering legislative issues and possible options to allow such naming and shaming of individual petrol station owners involved in this illicit trade.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I know that you chair the Organised Crime Task Force. Can you update us on the wider issues in tackling fuel laundering fraud across Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: Although my colleague, rightly, says that I chair the OCTF, much of it is the responsibility of individual agencies within the OCTF, principally HMRC, which is in the lead for a variety of work. I have certainly been kept well abreast of the work that it has been doing in developing a new marker for rebated diesel fuel. That is in the process of being introduced over the next 18 months or so. It is a joint project between HMRC and the Irish Revenue Commissioners, and the scientists assure us that it will make it significantly more difficult to launder, if at all possible, than the current markers. Therefore, it should assist significantly in the fight against crime.

There are also regular raids on laundering sites and suspected laundering sites. I have had the pleasure of visiting some of them, although to describe it as "pleasure" to wade through a kind of sludge from the output of this laundering, specifically where filtrate is used to take the colour out of markers, is hardly a pleasure. To see the environmental damage that is being

done to rivers and burns across Northern Ireland is quite horrifying.

We also introduced legislation in December last that will allow unduly lenient sentences for excise evasion on fuel to be referred to the Court of Appeal by the DPP. I hope that that will also show that, should sentences be awarded that are not sufficiently serious, they will be followed up in a way that ensures custodial sentences, where appropriate.

Courts: Disabled Facilities

9. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Justice how he ensures that any facilities used by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service are assessed to ensure that they meet the needs of people with disabilities. (AQO 6165/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service ensures that its estate meets the needs of people with a disability by commissioning disability audits for each venue and, as far as is reasonably practical, implementing the recommendations. A rolling programme of work has been undertaken to upgrade the estate and to improve and enhance access for disabled service users.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Hussey for a very brief supplementary.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his answer. He referred to disabled access: does he agree with me that disabled facilities in most of these areas are very poor?

Mr Ford: I will give a very brief answer: no, I would not agree with that. Certainly, in some of our older courthouses, facilities are less than ideal, but I believe that facilities for disabled people in our modern courthouses are, by and large, extremely good.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We move on to topical questions. Jim Allister is not in his place.

3.00 pm

Legal Highs

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department is working closely with local government to learn lessons and assist in removing legal highs, which have severe adverse effects on our young people, from the

streets, given that, although suppliers of so-called legal highs often change their formula to evade misuse of drugs legislation, Belfast City Council successfully used general product safety regulations to address the problem in its area, with UUP councillor Mark McKinty taking that issue to Larne Borough Council and gaining the support of council and the PSNI for the same type of raid in Larne last week. (AQT 1142/11-15)

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Beggs for the question, which also featured at my previous Question Time.

The issue of legal highs and other such substances is not one for the DOJ to address directly. However, my Department cooperated in arrangements with Belfast City Council's environmental health officers (EHOs). That saw five shops raided and prosecutions taken last year under the regulations, which were highlighted by Mr Beggs, regarding general product safety as opposed to anything specifically related to dangerous drugs.

My understanding is that EHOs spread that information to other council colleagues across Northern Ireland. I do not think that Larne is the second council to have done that — Omagh may have been — but there have been a number of cases in which the issues have been considered and work is being done by EHOs and the police. My officials have been assisting, where appropriate, with that, but we have not been taking the lead.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer and declare an interest as a treasurer of the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group.

Does the Minister agree that a relatively small amount of seed funding from the policing and community safety partnership (PCSP) can bring about great benefits in local communities by addressing drugs misuse through organisations, such as Preventing Addiction Larne? How effective has the funding spent from the policing and community safety partnership been in Larne?

Mr Ford: I do not have the detail of how Larne spends its PCSP budget. However, Mr Beggs has highlighted something very positive: individual areas looking at the needs of their area, seeing how small sums of money given to NGOs can frequently be beneficial to fighting crime and promoting community safety, and — a further point that I made — ensuring that such good practice is shared. A lot of people

assume that what works in Larne will always work in Fermanagh. We must ensure that lessons are learnt and applied, as appropriate, in other districts. That is a very good example of how PCSPs are working in the way in which I hoped that they would when we introduced the idea in the Assembly in 2011.

Water: Safety Awareness Campaign

3. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department would consider taking the lead in coordinating an updated safety awareness campaign, involving the emergency services and voluntary organisations, to encourage people to be safe on the water, particularly at times of good weather, given that the Minister will be aware of the tragic drowning of Lee Rogers in Enniskillen at the weekend and will want to join him in taking this opportunity to express his sincerest condolences to Lee's family and friends and commend all those involved in the search and rescue operation. (AQT 1143/11-15)

Mr Ford: I send my condolences to Lee's family, as Mr Flanagan has done.

The Department of Justice has taken the lead in coordinating search and rescue by liaising with other agencies across the UK and, indeed, with Irish agencies. The Department is not, however, formally in the lead, and there is a slightly difficult position whereby DCAL in particular has some responsibilities, especially around mountain and cave rescue, while others, such as lowland search and rescue are not particularly the responsibility of any Department to coordinate.

I agree that there is a need for joining up. I am not entirely convinced at this stage that the DOJ is the appropriate Department to do that coordination, given that much of the responsibility rests with DCAL. The important thing is that we see Executive Departments working with the relevant agencies to ensure that we provide the best possible way of providing the sort of support that is needed, whether that be by mountain, cliff and cave rescue, by lowland search and rescue or by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI).

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I agree with him, in that I do not really care who takes the lead on it, as long as it is done. Would the Minister be prepared to engage in round-table discussions with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, some of her officials and voluntary organisations such as the RNLI, the North West Mountain Rescue

Team and Sligo coastguard to help the emergency services to ensure that there is a better proactive and reactive campaign to deal with these types of issues?

Mr Ford: I have been engaged in a number of discussions and, indeed, have met Lowland Rescue, for example. I met the North West Mountain Rescue Team at its base in County Fermanagh, which I never quite realised was in the north-west. So, discussions are ongoing, but I think that the need to ensure that we bring those to a conclusion as speedily as possible was highlighted in the tragedy this weekend.

Fuel Laundering

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Justice whether he shares his frustration and anger with the fact that many of those involved in illegal fuel laundering have not appeared before the courts and have not been convicted, given that he will have seen reports on the news this morning about how some of those people have recruited scientists to try to break some of the markers in the fuel. (AQT 1144/11-15)

Mr Ford: I share the anger that people who are committing crimes have not been made amenable for those crimes yet. I know that HMRC and the police are doing good work. Unfortunately, however, in many cases, the work that is going on in fuel laundering does not involve teams of people sitting in a laboratory; frequently, these things are carried out automatically with limited human contact to the point where the crimes are being committed.

So, it is not a particularly easy task. That is why the importance, which was highlighted, of addressing a better marker issue has to be progressed. HMRC is doing good work on a regular basis, but we have to acknowledge that the scale of fuel laundering in Northern Ireland is significantly higher than that in any other region of these islands. That is creating problems for the law enforcement agencies.

Mr Ross: Is it an additional difficulty for the law agencies here in Northern Ireland to catch those who are involved in illegal fuel laundering, given that the National Crime Agency (NCA) is not able to operate here in Northern Ireland? Would he again reiterate the call that was made this morning for those parties that are refusing to allow the NCA to operate in Northern Ireland to allow that to happen so that the criminals who are involved in illegal fuel laundering can be caught and brought before the courts?

Mr Ford: If Mr Ross wishes me to agree again with the vital necessity of getting the NCA in place to fight crime in the devolved sphere, I will happily do so. The practical reality with fuel laundering is that excise duty is a non-devolved issue. Therefore, the NCA could be available to assist HMRC. Of course, many of these criminals are carrying out other criminal activity, much of which is covered by devolution, and that creates difficulty for the NCA with exactly where the boundaries lie.

However, he had better not be too specific about excise duty evasion, although his point is absolutely right. I certainly trust that Members who have been reluctant up to now to see us move forward on allowing the NCA to help us in the fight against crimes such as trafficking and child exploitation will see the necessity to do that in line with the safeguards that have been secured.

Desertcreat Discussions

5. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Justice for an update — no doubt he will not be surprised by the question — on the Desertcreat discussions. (AQT 1145/11-15)

Mr Ford: Although that is no surprise whatsoever, since the matter rests with the programme board that is looking at cost reduction, I am afraid that I am not in a position to give any specific update at this stage. I hope that we will be in a better position by the middle of next month to see what the cost-reduction exercise has amounted to and what it is possible to achieve. However, to give him the answer that he really wants to hear, I am happy to confirm to Mr McCrea that the Department of Justice remains committed to having world-class training facilities at Desertcreat for the three services together.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister has, indeed, given me the answer that I really wanted. He will be aware that there is a lot of frustration with the talk from those in other constituencies across Northern Ireland suggesting that they would be better suited, having former Army barracks sites etc. The Minister has done this already, but can he again give his assurance that he will continue to battle through the difficulties to ensure that this is provided in Cookstown and that he will work alongside Executive colleagues to try to make the facility a reality once and for all?

Mr Ford: I can certainly give a commitment that the DOJ, in so far as it speaks for the Prison Service and works with colleagues in the Police

Service, will continue to show its commitment. I trust that Mr McCrea will subject the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to the same questioning, on behalf of the Fire and Rescue Service.

Article 2-compliant Inquests: Delay

6. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the unacceptable delay in the hearing of article 2-compliant inquests. (AQT 1146/11-15)

Mr Ford: That we have significant issues in dealing with the past generally and how that ties in with inquests in particular has been highlighted quite clearly. There are huge issues relating to resourcing in that matter. Members are well aware of the concerns that I have at the fact that we failed to reach agreement, in the talks chaired by Dr Richard Haass last year and in the party leaders' talks since then, to find a comprehensive way of dealing with the past. To be strictly technical, many of those historic inquests will never be article 2-compliant, because article 2 requires speedy action, and we could no longer say that it was speedy. However, we must seek to make the inquests as compliant as possible as fast as we can.

Without the resources that we need, and given the large number of cases that are currently in the system relating to historic inquests, the position is extremely difficult. I hope that, if the House is prepared to pass the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill, by giving the appropriate responsibilities to the Chief Constable — sorry, to the Lord Chief Justice — and others, we will be able to see that we can get better direction into the working of the Coroners Service. However, it will also be essential that additional resources are provided to the DOJ to carry out the administrative work that goes with that.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will probably agree that we have a major responsibility to the families of the deceased, some of whom have gone to the grave without getting answers. If it is a matter of resourcing, has the Minister pursued this vigorously with the Secretary of State and other individuals with a specific responsibility in that area?

Mr Ford: I have certainly raised the issue with the Secretary of State. In my view, this particular section of the Haass report, looking at the historical investigations unit (HIU), was the best way that we could have ensured a proper investigation of a number of areas, including those which currently fall to the Police Ombudsman, the Historical Enquiries Team

and legacy inquests. In the circumstances in which a new unit was set up, I believe that we would have had a right to go to both the UK Government and the Irish Government to seek additional resources for it. In the absence of that agreement, it is very difficult to see how we would make the case for the additional resources that we so badly need.

Policing: Part-time Officers

7. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is aware of the content of a document prepared by the Deputy Chief Constable in relation to the future of the part-time police. (AQT 1147/11-15)

Mr Ford: No, I am not aware of it, but I suspect that a member of the Policing Board is about to tell me. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Hussey: I am not aware of the content of the document [*Laughter.*] but I am aware that it exists, and I thought that I would ask somebody more important who might know the answer. Does the Minister agree that part-time police officers are an essential backbone of the Police Service, and part-time police service should be encouraged and a part of the policing plan for the future?

Mr Ford: I note that Mr Hussey did not declare his past interest in such matters, unusually.

Both here and in other regions of the UK, it is clear that part-time police officers have performed a valuable role at different times. We also see the operation of policing community support officers in parts of England and Wales. So, there are a variety of models that would provide some additional support for the police. The precise way in which that would work is very much an operational issue for the Chief Constable, the Deputy Chief Constable and the approval of the Policing Board.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Claire Sugden is not in her place.

Prisons: Chaplaincy Services

9. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the discussions between the Prison Service and chaplaincy services within our prisons. (AQT 1149/11-15)

Mr Ford: The best way in which chaplaincy services are provided to prisoners has been under discussion for a time with various senior Church representatives, because a number of

religious bodies currently have chaplains. As ever, there are issues relating to both cost and the most appropriate way of providing those services.

My understanding is that, following the circulation of a proposal from the Prison Service to, at least, the four senior Church representatives — I am not sure how many others may have been involved because there are issues with the role of lead chaplain in different prisons — there have been some partial responses but not yet any full responses. Therefore, I am not entirely clear where the Churches stand, but I believe that we need to ensure that, along with the other aspects of providing efficiency, proper chaplaincy services are provided to support prisoners, particularly those who are vulnerable.

3.15 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 3 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Active Farmer

1. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's definition of an active farmer. (AQO 6171/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. EU legislation adopted by the EU Commission on 11 March 2014 states:

"In line with the case-law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, payment entitlements should be allocated to the person enjoying decision-making power, benefits and financial risks in relation to the agricultural activity on the land for which such allocation is requested."

My Department will act in accordance with that legislation. This means that, in future, direct payments, which are intended as an income support for farmers, should go to those who actively farm the land in question. This provision has particular relevance for land let under conacre arrangements. In general terms, this means that, in 2015, when all existing single farm payment entitlements are abolished and new entitlements established, landowners

letting out land in conacre will not be able to establish entitlements on that land, the principle being that where land is let, the farmer actively farming it will be the one claiming direct payments on it.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her answer. Has she any intention of bringing in a minimum stocking rate to define active farmers?

Mrs O'Neill: No, that is not within our scope. I know that people are very concerned to know the clear definition of an active farmer, and I have set out what Europe has set down. We are trying to make that available for everybody to see so that landowners in particular can establish whether they are active farmers. The basic rule is that, if you are not sure whether you are an active farmer, in all likelihood, you are not. For clarity, if anyone is unsure, they should check the DARD website for the question and answer (Q&A) section, which is very detailed, or phone the helpline for any support that they may need.

Mrs Dobson: I doubt that even the Minister would be brazen enough to claim that her Department has handled the definition of an active farmer well. Yet again, what should have been a relatively straightforward procedure was overridden with avoidable ineptitude from her Department. Will she now tell us the exact implications of the current definition for Northern Ireland's conacre system?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that throughout this difficult process, we very much fought our corner in Europe to make sure that we had as much clarity as possible so that we could provide the same to our farmers. Unfortunately, Europe was slow in making the regulations and ensuring that everything was clear. As soon as we were aware of the final definition of an active farmer, which I have just outlined, we made sure that local farmers were aware of it. I could give it no sooner than when I received it.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. What impact will the active farmer regulation have on farmers who rent land in conacre?

Mrs O'Neill: If, on 15 May 2015, farmers have land at their disposal, meaning that they own it or have taken it in conacre for the purposes of agricultural activity, they can establish the entitlements on that land. As they will be the claimant, they will also be responsible for cross-compliance on the land for the entire calendar year. There are many different scenarios and everybody's situation is different. Sometimes,

farmers own the land; sometimes, they rent it. They should be encouraged to read the Q&A on the website or contact DARD because there is no blanket approach to any of this.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Does she agree that a lot of landowners are very unsure of what is happening with the term "active farmer"? What more can she do to clarify the situation for them?

Mrs O'Neill: This is very complex and there are major changes. People have been cautious about taking what are, effectively, business decisions.

We updated the Q&As on the website daily. That was done in line with the questions that farmers were asking us. Therefore, we tried to provide as much clarity as possible throughout the process. I also extended the trading deadline by an extra month to allow people a bit more time to make decisions. As I clarified information, we were then able to get it out there as quickly as possible.

I absolutely accept that it is a time of massive change for farmers and landowners. However, the principle around an active farmer is that support goes only to those who are genuinely active farming.

CAP: Allocations

2. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the common agricultural policy pillar 1 moneys will be allocated over the next seven years. (AQO 6172/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Two major issues will affect how pillar 1 moneys will be allocated to farmers over 2015-19. They are the transition towards a flat rate payment per hectare and the number of regions designated for administering the direct support regime.

We have considerable flexibility on the pace of transition towards a flat rate payment regime, although the EU regulation requires that we achieve a minimum level of migration by 2019. The pace at which we move to a flat rate is complex and will affect virtually every farmer in the North. Farmers in all areas — severely disadvantaged areas (SDAs), disadvantaged areas and lowlands — rely heavily on that support, and there is concern that a fast transition could be damaging and difficult for many producers. However, I also know that

many other farmers want a rapid transition to a flat rate.

The regulation also allows for more than one region to be established in the North. Again, stakeholders have differing views on that issue. There has been much debate on the merits of a two-region versus a single-region model. Analysis shows that having two regions makes little difference to the overall magnitude of the redistribution of support between farmers compared with a single-region model, but it does cause a different redistribution. It would also create a more complex support regime.

Those decisions still have to be taken. Given the major significance of the choices that face us, we need to take the time that is available to us to make the very best decisions that we can, balancing the competing needs of all sections of the farming community.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer. When will she and the Department have concrete proposals, and when can they be put to the Executive for agreement on a single zone or otherwise and the period of transition?

Mrs O'Neill: Political discussions are ongoing to agree the remaining issues. We have provided as much clarity as possible on all the other decisions that we have taken and ensured that that information is out there. However, the sooner we have a political deal on the way forward, the better. We have until August to declare our hand to Europe. However, I would like us to be in a position to take a decision well in advance of that August deadline. We will work through the process, after which we hope to be able to clarify those remaining key issues for farmers. They are massive key issues because of the supports and how they will be tailored. I want to be in a position to do that sooner rather than later.

Mr Frew: The Minister is right when she says that two key issues could damage the industry in Northern Ireland. Given that she stated in her latest answer that a quick and immediate change to a flat rate could damage the farming industry, will she reassure the House that that will not be the case? How does she counter claims from her colleague the Sinn Féin MEP, who said that she wants a flat rate immediately?

Mrs O'Neill: Because the changes are so major, it is important that we get them right. It is important that we do not rush them simply to serve the people who want a decision today. I wish that we could clarify the position today.

However, we are in a political process, which I am happy to go through. These are fundamental key issues that will tailor how supports are distributed across the North, so it is important that we get it right.

Do I want a move to a flat rate sooner rather than later? Absolutely, so I support my colleague in that respect. However, we are being very reasonable. We are taking decisions on moving forward that will have major implications for some farmers. In moving forward, it is reasonable that there is a transition period. It is reasonable that we take our time to make those decisions and ensure that they are right and proper.

Since Sinn Féin took up the Agriculture Department, it has made it very clear that it is an economic Department. We want to drive the agriculture industry. We have a strong commitment to the agrifood sector, which is evidenced in our work in that sector.

In moving forward, we have to go through the political process. We want clarification on those remaining issues for farmers sooner rather than later. I will work through the process. As soon as I have agreement on the way forward, I will ensure that it is communicated to farmers immediately.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. It is interesting to hear so many people talking about a transition period and how long it will be. The Minister will be well aware that, in my county of Fermanagh, there is quite large and active support for the work of the SDA group. What would the Minister say to those farmers who highlight the fact that there was no transition period when the system was brought in and that they were discriminated against? People are now talking about a transition period of 10 or 15 years to get them back on to the system that will treat them with fairness.

Mrs O'Neill: It is very simple. Anybody who may lose out as a result of changes is concerned and wants a period of transition. Anybody who will gain obviously wants to see it sooner rather than later. The current system is flawed. I believe that we need to move to a flat rate sooner rather than later. However, I am reasonable in that I know that people need time to adjust. We are talking about businesses that could go under if they are faced with a default position in Europe.

Let us remind ourselves of the default position, which will be a flat rate immediately in 2015 and a single region. If there is no political

agreement, that is the position that we will be taking. I want to get political agreement, but it is up to the partners in government as well to make sure that that happens.

Animal Welfare

4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will initiate a review of the implementation of animal welfare legislation. (AQO 6174/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I welcomed the opportunity to debate the issue of animal cruelty in the Assembly on 31 March 2014. It was a timely debate given the number of high-profile convictions that were secured recently under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011.

I share the concerns of the public and Members of the Assembly that the penalties imposed by the courts must fit the crime and provide a deterrent to others who might engage in acts of animal cruelty. For that reason, I supported the motion that called for a review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act and of sentencing guidelines and practices. I note that, since the debate, a prison sentence has recently been handed down in a case of very serious cruelty against farm animals. That case was investigated by my Department, and I find the sentence encouraging. Work on the review of the implementation of the Act is ongoing. My officials are developing terms of reference for the review, which will include engagement with the Department of Justice, and I anticipate that the review will commence shortly thereafter.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know that she was as disappointed as anybody in the community at the outcome of some of the lenient sentences that have been handed out recently. Will the review consider the adequacy of maximum penalties for animal cruelty and the adequacy of the current level of resourcing for enforcement duties?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. When we review, we will review everything. We will look at the effectiveness of the Act, the practicalities, the implementation on the ground and even the funding. Looking at the whole gamut of issues is the most effective way to take forward any review.

Mr Campbell: Sentencing is one thing, but I presume that the Minister will agree that members of the public are the greatest assets in reporting offenders for animal cruelty, particularly in rural areas. What is she doing to

ensure that the public know and understand that, when they report cases, those cases are acted upon immediately?

Mrs O'Neill: Councils are involved in the work on the ground, and, through their websites and through local publications, they have actively been trying to promote the service that they provide. During the review, we can certainly look at whether there is anything else that we can do to communicate with the public, because we obviously want people to come forward. If you look at the number of people who have contacted the animal welfare officers to report cases of suspected animal cruelty, you will see that people are very keen to come forward. From memory, the number is in the region of 12,000 people. The fact that that number of people has come forward is very positive, and it is encouraging that people want to stamp this out and want to help the animal welfare officers do their job.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Who is responsible for the enforcement of animal welfare abuses of non-farmed animals?

Mrs O'Neill: The PSNI has the responsibility for enforcement in respect of wild animals, animal fighting and welfare issues where other criminal activities are involved, and councils have responsibility for enforcement in respect of non-farmed animals such as domestic pets and horses. Councils have nine animal welfare officers to enforce the Act right across the North, and the powers in the Act allow those animal welfare officers to take a range of actions to address any animal welfare case, including providing advice, giving a warning, issuing a legally binding improvement notice or prosecution. The circumstances of each case will determine the most appropriate action.

It is important that the PSNI, councils and my Department are involved in the enforcement of the Act as it provides a new duty of care and allows inspectors to issue improvement notices for animals that are not being cared for properly.

That would not be appropriate work for the PSNI. However, should the PSNI wish to investigate and prosecute any animal welfare complaint, the Act provides those powers. Importantly, only the PSNI can make arrests in any matter where an offence has been committed under the Act.

3.30 pm

Mr A Maginness: I note what the Minister has said, and I am sure that her concern about animal cruelty is sincere, but what has she done to express disquiet and concern about the leniency of sentences to the judiciary, the police, the Public Prosecution Service, animal welfare organisations and anybody else, including the Minister of Justice?

Mrs O'Neill: I have discussed the issue with the Minister of Justice. I have also written to the Lord Chief Justice to express my concern about sentencing. That is a particular issue. If the Act is fit for purpose — my early assessment is that it is, although there may be areas where we can strengthen it — and clearly allows for tougher sentencing, we need the judiciary to follow through on that. The leniency of the sentence in the recent case in east Belfast was particularly concerning. I have written to the Lord Chief Justice to express concern and to ask for consistency. Since the east Belfast case, another enforcement case has been taken in relation to farmed animals. I am encouraged by the fact that the sentencing in that case was not as lenient. Hopefully, that reflects the attitude of the judiciary in going forward.

Mr Kinahan: I am glad to come back to the subject, particularly after the Crosskennan problem with Belfast City Council. The Minister has just indicated that she will give more guidance, but does she accept that it was wrong of her predecessor to dismiss the concerns of many, including this party, that her Department was not offering councils enough direct support and guidance following the decision on animal welfare responsibilities? Will she consider giving additional funding to councils to help the ratepayers who end up footing the bill?

Mrs O'Neill: My predecessor initiated the legislation, the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. The legislation that we have in place is very strong, particularly compared with what is in place in England, Scotland and Wales. She very clearly listened to the views of stakeholders in developing that legislation. As I said earlier in respect of the review and in the recent Assembly debate, I will take a step back and look at everything that is in place around the enforcement role and the role of councils. Obviously, funding is another area that will be considered as part of that overarching review.

Farm Animals: Illegal Slaughter

5. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her

Department is tackling the problem of the illegal slaughter of farm animals. (AQO 6175/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Responsibility for regulating the slaughter of farm animals lies with the Food Standards Agency (FSA). District council environmental health officers, on behalf of the FSA, investigate allegations of animals slaughtered illegally, from a public health perspective. However, my Department has responsibility for investigating any animal health or welfare breaches associated with that illegal activity. Although suspect cases are uncommon, where illegal slaughter is suspected, enforcement officers from the Department's veterinary service work closely with the police, the FSA and the relevant environmental health office in adopting a multi-agency approach to dismantling such operations and taking appropriate enforcement action.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for her answer. How successful has her Department been in identifying any traceability elements of the animals involved?

Mrs O'Neill: Unless the Member is referring to a particular case, I cannot comment. It is key that the FSA is very much in the lead on the slaughter of animals, although my Department will work collectively with the other agencies, such as the police and environmental health officers. We have a central enforcement team in place that takes the lead in some instances. A lot of these activities are criminal, and they damage the reputation of the wider meat industry. We are, obviously, concerned about that because we have farm quality assured beef and we have something that we can stand over. Such illegal activity damages our reputation, so we want to make sure that we can stamp it out where possible and work collectively to do that.

Mr Swann: I realise that the Minister has said that her Department is not responsible for investigating illegal slaughter, but it was her Department's animal and public health information system (APHIS) that reported that 12,500 cattle had been stolen or had gone missing over the past four years. Where does the Minister think they are going?

Mrs O'Neill: You may put that question to the people involved in that illegal activity. We work very closely with the PSNI. Any of these incidents usually involve a wider criminal gang; there can be other aspects to it. Quite often, the PSNI is in the lead. We are content to work with the PSNI and use our services. Our central enforcement team is very effective on

the ground. It works very effectively with the other agencies, because it is a collective effort to eradicate something that is obviously a particular problem.

Where are the cattle going? It is illegal activity, and we will try to expose it where we can. We had a recent case in which it was exposed, and investigations are ongoing. We hope to see more of those as the close collaboration continues.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister outline what implications this all for the safety of supply in food?

Mrs O'Neill: That is why it is important that we do all we can to tackle the problem. It ruins the reputational aspect of what we have. What we have is fully traceable, and we can stand over it. Any meat slaughtered in an appropriate manner is fully traceable. It is high-quality and is second to none. The only issue we have is where there is illegal activity. We want to drive that out because it causes reputational damage. As I said, we have to do that with all the agencies and partner agencies involved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Craig. I hope to be able to hear your question.

Single Farm Payment

6. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when farmers will be informed of the rate of single farm payment they can expect to receive in the current round of consideration. (AQO 6176/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The single farm payment scheme entitlements are denominated in euro. The vast majority of claimants in the North elect to be paid in sterling. The exchange rate used in 2014 will be the rate recorded by the European Central Bank on 30 September this year. The Department will make a press announcement at that point to confirm the rate to be used.

The single farm payments received by farm businesses in 2014 will also be affected by the rates of financial discipline and scale-back of entitlements. Those rates are set by the European Commission and will be announced in the autumn. Farm businesses will be informed by letter in the autumn of the value of their entitlements after scale-back has been applied.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for that answer. I take it that she will ensure that those dates will be met by the Department. Critically, this dictates the income for farmers throughout the Province. They need some certainty with their banks so that they have an income that makes them viable. If the rates change dramatically from previous years, will you give the House the guarantee that your Department will do everything in its power to minimise the impact on our rural farming communities?

Mrs O'Neill: We go through this process every year, and farmers know when to expect the date. They know that, every year, the exchange rate is set by the bank in September. They also know that, in autumn, shortly after that, when Europe confirms its element, I will make that public and we will inform them all in writing. It is the same process every year; there is nothing new.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go nuige seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. Is she in a position to provide us with some detail on the single farm payments due in the 2013-14 financial year? How many remained outstanding for payment at the commencement of this financial year?

Mrs O'Neill: Of last year's single farm payments, 99.5% have been paid. The only remaining cases involve reasons of probate, or there may be legal reasons, or people might not have provided bank details. They are the only people outstanding. We far exceeded our targets. We paid four months earlier than ever before this year. We had some issues around remote sensing, but those people were still paid earlier than ever before. I am really pleased to confirm that, this year, we have received over 40% single farm payment applications online. I said to the farming industry that, if more people applied online, I could pay them more quickly, so I am delighted that we have more than doubled the number of people who have applied online. That is a very positive news story. Hopefully, that will have a very positive impact on next year's payment targets. I think that we will far exceed them again.

Forest Service: Relocation

8. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the relocation of the Forest Service to Fermanagh. (AQO 6178/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The relocation of the Forest Service headquarters from Stormont to Fermanagh is progressing on three fronts: where, who and when. We continue to develop an estate management strategy, which is pointing to Enniskillen as the preferred location for Forest Service headquarters. We have commissioned DFP's Central Procurement Directorate to report on the feasibility of accommodating staff by refurbishing Inishkeen House at Killyhevlin. That would locate Forest Service with the existing DARD Direct service there. We have sought information on the preference of staff who currently work at Stormont and will use that to develop a staff transition plan. I do not expect that anyone will be required to move if it does not suit, and we are developing a strategy to deal with that. Over time, I believe that many of the jobs will be taken by local residents, and it will afford an opportunity for those people to work in the public sector at the highest level. All of this work is pointing to a timeline that will see Forest Service headquarters substantively established in Fermanagh by June 2015, subject to the business case.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answer and the positive news that we are finally going to see the Forest Service being substantially relocated to Fermanagh by June of next year. It has been a long time coming.

Can the Minister clarify how many jobs we are talking about? There are some question marks hanging over exactly how many jobs will transfer to Fermanagh.

Mrs O'Neill: Sixty-one Forest Service posts have been identified as headquarters jobs. A small number of additional posts associated with plant health policies have also joined Forest Service and will also be headquarters-based. The target operating model at this stage, subject to establishing the optimum number of plant health posts and inclusive of posts already based there, includes around 78 posts in total.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her answer. Following the scale-back from the original decision to relocate the Forest Service to Fermanagh, can she give a commitment that she will not seek to do the same with the Rivers Agency's relocation to Loughry?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member must be confused: there is no scale-back. The move to

Fermanagh is going ahead, as is the move of the fisheries division to County Down, Rivers Agency to Loughry and headquarters to Ballykelly. We are firmly on target. We are building on the work that we need to do. This is about the fair distribution of public sector jobs and about giving people access to Civil Service jobs. It is only right and proper, and I am glad that my Department is leading the way.

CAP: Reform Proposals

9. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will bring the common agricultural policy reform proposals to the Northern Ireland Executive. (AQO 6179/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In the case of pillar one, which refers to producer support, I have already announced a number of important decisions relating to entitlements, eligible land, active farmers, greening, regional reserve, the young farmers' scheme and capping. However, a number of key decisions remain to be taken. As I said last Thursday at the Balmoral show, we have to keep in mind the significance of the choices that we make. We are talking about the allocation of almost €2 billion of taxpayers' money over the remainder of this decade. That has to be done carefully, wisely and fairly. We need to be mindful not just of the allocation of CAP support but of the potential bureaucratic burden and the risks we pose for ourselves in whatever choices we make.

Given the importance of these remaining decisions, it is so important that we get it right. Political discussions are ongoing in relation to the remaining key issues, and it is my intention to bring my final proposals to the Executive in the coming weeks. I am, of course, mindful of the 1 August deadline to notify the European Commission of our implementation plans, and it is most certainly my intention that we will have an agreed CAP pillar one structure before that date.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the House that the Speaker had made a very clear ruling that loud conversations should not take place on the Benches. I ask Members to respect that ruling, as I can hear those conversations quite clearly from here. I call Mr Elliott.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I hope that I was not referred to in that, because I have been sitting here on my own for quite a while. *[Laughter.]* I appreciate that the Minister touched on some of

these issues in her earlier answer, but can she give some more detail of what stage the discussions on finalising the CAP proposals that she is having with other political parties, representatives of the Executive and other stakeholders are at?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware, given the significance of these decisions and changes, that we have had a massive consultation. We have had probably the biggest ever response to a consultation, and we have had numerous public meetings, with halls across the North packed with people wanting to have their view heard. I am happy to listen to all those views. I have confirmed quite a number of decisions. However, as I said, a few key decisions remain to be taken, and I am actively working through that process as we speak. I hope to be able to confirm decisions sooner rather than later. We certainly do not want to wait until the August deadline. We would like to have confirmation for farmers well in advance of that date.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Wilson for a supplementary question, although I think that I have probably heard most of it.
[Laughter.]

Mr Wilson: Does the Minister accept that, despite what she has said about extensive consultation, what farmers now require is confirmation of the arrangements that will be in place for payments, especially around the single farm payment and the CAP reform proposals?

Many now find themselves in the position of facing an uncertain financial future because of the way in which she has dilly-dallied on the issue. If she really wants to give comfort to farmers, will she get a paper to her Executive colleagues so that a decision can be made?

3.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. That ends the period for questions for oral answer.
[Laughter.] That question was so long. We move now to topical questions.

Farming Community: Ministerial Engagement

1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she had much engagement with the farming community during the Balmoral show and what feedback she received. (AQT 1151/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Balmoral show was fantastic, and the weather was kind. This was the second year at the new site. I think that it was evident for all to see that the show, which will be built on year on year, was very much enjoyed. The numbers this year were fantastic again. I spent most of Thursday there, and engagement was excellent with the farming community, the wider rural community and all the businesses that had an opportunity exhibit what they have to offer, so it was very positive.

CAP reform was the topic of the day, which you would expect. I celebrated quite a number of very successful rural development programme projects, which, again, was very positive. I also visited many stands. All round, it was a fantastic, successful show.

Mr McAleer: Minister, at the show, you announced your intention to implement the young farmers' scheme. Will you give us an assessment of the impact that that will have on the farming community?

Mrs O'Neill: Looking to the future, we need young people in the farming industry, and we want them to remain in the farming industry. At the Balmoral show breakfast, I was able to announce that we have decided to allocate 2% of our regional ceiling to the young farmers' scheme. That payment will be 25% of the total direct payments' regional average, which is approximately €84 a hectare. I know that young farmers very much welcome that. After the DARD breakfast, I met the Young Farmers' Clubs and it was pleased and delighted about the announcement.

I also announced information on the educational requirements. We have gone some way to addressing the concerns about whether we should have a level 2 or level 3 qualification. Again, that has been positively welcomed.

This is all about trying to make a sustainable farming future and supporting our young people to stay in agriculture. The fact that so many want to get involved in food and agriculture courses is testimony to the fact that they want to stay in farming. This is an opportunity for me, and, as I said, being able to support those young farmers financially has been very positive.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Trevor Lunn is not in his place.

Rural Development Programme

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the rural development programme will be finalised to allow the rural community to benefit from it, given that it is one of the most important instruments for the development of the rural economy. (AQT 1153/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: We are working our way through the process now. We had a major consultation on the rural development programme. We have set up a stakeholder consultation group, which is looking at all the proposals that we set out. People showed a particular interest in that in their responses to the consultation. We know that we have been allocated just over €227 million by Europe. I am looking at how my Department and the Executive can match that funding so that we will know the total and final scope of the rural development programme.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her very clear answer. In the last part of her answer, she referred to co-match funding. When will that be agreed by the Executive to ensure that we have a meaningful rural development programme?

Mrs O'Neill: I am hopeful that that will happen very soon. It is important that we hit the ground running with the new programme. We do not want any delays, so we are working up proposals based on different financial allocations. In the very near future, we will hopefully have discussions with the Executive around the Going for Growth strategy, and those discussions will help me decide on the final allocations for the rural development programme and then the final programmes. However, we are certainly not waiting until that happens. We have been involved with the stakeholder group, and we are talking through the possible ideas, which will depend on the final budget settlement that we get.

Beef Sector: DARD Support

5. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any support she intends to put in place for the beef sector in these difficult times. (AQT 1155/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, we have concerns for the beef sector at this time. We want to see a strong, profitable red meat sector, and we want to do everything that we can to achieve that. Farmers have to receive a fair price for what they produce. Only when that happens will we

have fairness in the supply chain and a sustainable red meat sector.

I am obviously very sympathetic to the very challenging issues that our beef sector is facing. I have met representatives of the sector and I have instructed my officials to work on how we can shape the new rural development programme and, through it, what support we can provide for the beef sector. We are working our way through that now. It is obvious that, if we are going to have a sustainable beef sector in the future, we have to look at new markets and at export opportunities. That is why we have visited places such as China and OFMDFM has visited other areas. So we need to target those markets because, if we are going to grow the exports and sales that are set out in the Going for Growth strategy, the beef sector needs to be supported. I am obviously very keen that the new rural development programme supports that industry going forward.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra go dtí seo. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her answer thus far. Has she spoken to Minister Coveney in the South to discuss her concerns?

Mrs O'Neill: I regularly engage with Minister Coveney to discuss things. Coincidentally, I had a phone call with him just about half an hour ago. We are talking about how we can collectively work together to deal with issues, particularly on nomadic cattle. That is a term that I hate, but it is how the industry has termed cattle that are born and reared in the North and then slaughtered in the South or vice versa. There are particular challenges for the beef industry, and he and I are keen to work together. One area that we discussed today was asking Europe to recognise that we have a distinct situation here and that we are very different. I think that it is important that we are able to market our produce as Irish produce when businesses want to. So we are going to go to Europe together to collectively make our voice heard. We are both involved in a round of engagements with retailers and the large supermarkets on their specifications for the meat industry. Again, that is something that is causing problems for the type of meat that is coming forward. So quite a lot of work is going on between me and Minister Coveney, in the NSMC and outside it.

Cattle Residency Criteria

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to resolve the significant concerns that there are from livestock markets about the various cattle residency criteria that are being imposed by DARD and the abattoirs. (AQT 1156/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: First, I will correct something that you said. Nothing is being imposed by DARD. Those are commercial matters that are outside the Department's remit. Criteria have been set down very clearly by the processors. I have met their representatives and have made it very clear that I do not support this, that it is challenging for the industry, and that, to bring something in with no communication with the industry is, quite simply, not good enough. People have bought cattle at high prices and are now stuck, with nowhere to go to have them slaughtered. It is not good enough, and I have made my position on that very clear. I will continue to engage with those people. In answer to a previous question, I talked about doing a round of meetings with the retailers, and we will also do a round of meetings with the processors. If we are going to have a sustainable industry going forward, it is key that those people do not take decisions on their own without consulting the farming industry. It is just simply not good enough.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the Minister's opposition to the imposition of those criteria. She indicated that she is having discussions with the retailers. Is there any indication that they are in support of the processors doing this or are the processors doing it of their own volition?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that there is possibly a mixture of both, but, until I have met them all, it is hard to confirm that. As I said, I intend to meet them to impress on them that some of the requirements are nonsense. There is a traditional trade across the island of people buying in certain counties and always coming here for slaughter.

We do not need to disrupt that. This is a nonsense. It is all the same beef and it is all fully traceable, so there are no areas for concern. That is the message that I want to put to them clearly when I have that round of meetings next week.

Bovine TB

7. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the strategy to reduce bovine TB in herds. (AQT 1157/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My officials have been with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development over the past number of weeks to update it on where we are with the proposals. It is quite a detailed proposal on what we are trying to do, but obviously TB is a very complicated disease. There is no quick fix; I wish there was. We are working our way through the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) research proposals. Those are quite detailed, so I will not go into them all now, but I am happy to provide that to the Member in writing. Basically, we are actively trying to tackle the wildlife issue alongside all the other work that we are doing on our EU eradication plan.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for her answer. When will the TVR scheme be rolled out on the ground?

Mrs O'Neill: We got Executive agreement last week, so we are able to go out and start our badger sett survey work. It is commencing immediately, so it may be on the ground already. If not, it will be over the next number of days.

Rural Development Programme

8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the new rural development programme. (AQT 1158/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Considerable progress has been made on developing the new plan for the 2014-2020 rural development period. There was considerable interest in the public consultation process that was carried out. We have listened to all the views that we received. A stakeholder consultation group was established last year to provide a forum for the key stakeholders to discuss and influence the development of the next programme. I know that that has been very beneficial for them and for the Department.

It is important that we learn lessons from the current programme and try to cut down on the red tape to make things simpler, particularly for businesses applying for funding where, potentially, it will be the same application process for £1,000 as for £20,000. There are things that we can iron out. I am very grateful

for the work of that stakeholder consultation group in assisting us in trying to iron all those things out. We now know that our allocation of EU funding is €227 million. However, in the absence of the ability to transfer any funds from pillar 1 to pillar 2, I will await the outcome of the Executive's discussion on Going for Growth before deciding on a final budget for the new rural development programme.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. I was going to ask her what stakeholder consultation and engagement has taken place, but she has answered that question. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Jim Allister is not in his place, so I call Mr Gregory Campbell.

CAP Reform

10. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she intends to have discussions over the next 10 days to resolve the CAP reform issue, given that, in answers to previous questions, she said that it could run to August. (AQT 1160/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am always looking for discussions. Discussions at a political level are ongoing. As I said, I do not want us running up to the 1 August deadline. I would like decisions to be taken sooner rather than later to provide the clarification that farmers are asking for.

Mr Campbell: If the discussions are not clarified and concluded until after the House rises at the beginning of July, what plans does she have to communicate with both the House and farmers directly?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, I hope we will not be in that position. However, there are urgent procedures and mechanisms in place to deal with that if we happen to be in that position.

Assembly Business

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Mr Brady asked a topical question on the rural development programme. It was exactly the same question as I asked the Minister. I ask the Principal Deputy Speaker to review whether it is appropriate or, indeed, in order for Members to repeat questions, particularly topical questions. I do not know whether Mr Brady was in the House when I asked my question, but it was identical. I ask that you review the matter.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: First, it is not a valid point of order. How Members use the opportunity of topical questions is entirely a matter for them, and it is up to Ministers whether they choose to repeat the answer to a previous question. The issue is not whether the Member was entitled to ask that question. I do not know his mind. He may have had in mind a particular issue that he hoped the Minister would pick up and address, but that is not for me to second-guess.

4.00 pm

Mr A Maginness: Further to that point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I will not delay you or the House very long. If that is the case and it is in order to do that, you could have 10 identical questions asked to the Minister and the Minister giving 10 identical answers. Therefore, I think that it is a point of order and a matter that could appropriately be looked at by the Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member will realise that, if the Minister has discretion, he or she will not repeat an answer 10 times. I think that it is a slightly ridiculous situation that you are painting for us. I have already said that it is not a valid point of order. The Member was entitled to put the question. Whether he was seeking a different response or further information is a matter for him and the Minister. The Minister chose to respond, and that, for me, satisfies the protocols and requirements of the House.

Adjourned at 4.02 pm.



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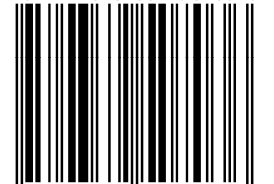
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